

“THE INVERSE PRAISE OF GOOD THINGS”:  
DIGNIFIED OPTIMISM IN THE SATIRE OF  
GEORGE SAUNDERS

---

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the

Degree of

Master of Arts in English

in the University of Canterbury

by Thaddaeus Hadaway

University of Canterbury

2019

---

## Table of Contents

<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>ABSTRACT</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>CHAPTER ONE: UNDERSTANDING SATIRE</b>	<b>12</b>
INTRODUCTION	12
THE MATERIAL OF SATIRE	14
THE SATIRIST	15
TOWARD DEFINITION	18
SATIRE AND POSTMODERNISM	33
SAUNDERS AND POSTMODERNISM	40
<b>CHAPTER TWO: TROUBLE IN PARADISE: OPTIMISM AND NEOLIBERALISM</b>	<b>44</b>
INTRODUCTION	44
INSECURITY AND ANXIETY IN “SEA OAK”	46
AMERICAN OPTIMISM	56
“ASK THE OPTIMIST!”	62
OPTIMISM AND NEOLIBERALISM	67
“PASTORALIA”	69
“EXHORTATION”	75
SOFT LANGUAGE	79
<b>CHAPTER THREE: “A RADICAL DEFENSE OF TENDERNESS”: SAUNDERS’ AFFECTIVE AMENDMENT</b>	<b>88</b>
INTRODUCTION	88
THE RESULTS OF SATIRE	91
THE VERY PERSISTENT GAPPERS OF FRIP	96
NARRATIVE EMPATHY	100
POINT OF VIEW	105
VIOLENCE	117
HOPE	125
<b>CONCLUSION</b>	<b>136</b>
<b>WORKS CITED</b>	<b>140</b>

### Acknowledgements

While this work is the product of my own academic pursuit, I have received great assistance along the way. I would like to thank Dr Nicholas Wright, who for many years has kindly assisted me in my interest of American literature, and whose empathetic and thoughtful encouragement made this thesis possible. Likewise, I thank Dr Christopher Thomson, whose expertise and feedback during this project was crucial and enriching. I also extend my gratitude to Peter Field, who introduced me to American history. I thank Dr Tearlach Maclean of the UC Health Centre. I am also indebted to the University of Canterbury for generously awarding me a Master's Scholarship. Special thanks go to my parents, Vern and Dawn, my good friend Ryan, and to my partner, Wendi. I thank each of you for your love, patience, and reassurance as I struggled with various setbacks and injuries. Finally, I thank George Saunders: your interest and support has been most kind and generous.

## Abstract

Through a critical examination of the stories of George Saunders, this thesis examines how Saunders uses satire in literary fiction after postmodernism. In doing so, I show Saunders is a second-generation postmodernist who, despite owing much to his contemporaries and predecessors, appears to offer contemporary American fiction a way out of its preoccupation with irony and solipsism. By analysing the sources and contexts of Saunders' satire, I argue that Saunders' stories take pleasure in their engagement with postmodern irony, but never at the expense of a moral agenda laced with satiric wit and narrative empathy. Saunders' literary satire differs from previous generations of postmodernists due to his satiric targets pointing to real world referents rather than language itself, as was popular in the late twentieth century. Additionally, I posit that satire in Saunders' stories represents a turn toward affect both on and off the page—it is new, tender, and wholly empathetic to its characters and readers. However, due to Saunders' use of violence and restricted narrative points of view, there are complexities and complications in Saunders' morally-charged and emotional satire. While his hopeful satire is sincere in its evocation of empathy with others, Saunders restricts reader choice and reminds his readers of his authorial power by way of narrative point of view. After all, so many of his stories are about authority, and include acts of writing and speech making. In this respect, the reader (as much as Saunders himself) is implicated in and comes to experience the conditions of choice Saunders writes about—conditions which often preclude real choice and empathetic consideration. Despite such complexities, Saunders' fiction offers a moral, sincere, and emotional challenge to the short stories of the late twentieth century.

In America, you'll get food to eat

Won't have to run through the jungle

And scuff up your feet

You'll just sing about Jesus and drink wine all day

It's great to be an American

— RANDY NEWMAN, "SAIL AWAY"

## Introduction

In 1999 *The New Yorker* published an article titled “The Future of American Fiction,” in which the magazine’s editors chose twenty writers who they believed to be the pioneers for a new generation of American fiction. Described as “most promising” and “most accomplished,” notable, well-established writers such as David Foster Wallace, Michael Chabon, Jonathan Franzen, and George Saunders were among those included (67). The article attempts to answer the question: “What are we to make of this snapshot of a generation on the eve of the next century?” (67). The editors are unable to confidently guess what the future of American fiction holds but they are assured that their list of writers offer “a satisfying picture ... of Americanness” (68). However, one is most certainly left to wonder what, besides their age, their “generation” is, and, too, what “Americanness” is on display. Interestingly, *The New Yorker* constructed another list in 2010 that followed the same rules. This later assessment concludes that: “the fiction being written in this country today is not necessarily fiction set in this country, or fiction by writers who were born in this country” (“20 Under 40” 50). The following thesis attempts to, in part, ascertain where George Saunders (a notable contemporary satirist) is situated among his contemporaries who are often described as postmodern.

Critics of Saunders’ stories consistently emphasise his original, satirical voice in American fiction, while believing him to be picking up the torch from his American literary forebears. Michiko Kakutani writes that: “Mr. Saunders writes like the illegitimate offspring of Nathanael West and Kurt Vonnegut,” (Kakutani n.p.) while Zadie Smith states that: “Not since Twain has America produced a satirist this funny” (Saunders, *CivilWarLand* n.p.). Likewise, Abby Werlock emphasises the importance of Saunders’ satire in her volume *The Facts on File: Companion to the American Short Story* (2010), in which she describes satire as:

A fictional work that ridicules some aspect of human behavior with the intent of improving the behavior or the situation that caused it. Unlike writers who simply criticize or use sarcasm, satirists blend humor with their censorious attitudes. (577)

This brief description, which I will elaborate on later, appropriately highlights the unusual blend of techniques in satire's construction. Tracing back to one of America's earliest satirists, Francis Hopkinson, Werlock notes that satire in American fiction has continued with greats such as Mark Twain, Edith Wharton, and Kurt Vonnegut into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (577). However, in this second edition of the short story companion, Werlock only mentions one writer in the contemporary era: "Writers such as George Saunders carry on the tradition today" (577). For Werlock, Saunders' impact on the "fiction and satirical front" is nothing less than "gigantic"—an adjective that is not carelessly used (578). Werlock astutely places Saunders within an as yet unnamed generation of writers who are both heirs to America's previous satirists and also innovators re-shaping literary satire in the present. Werlock concludes that: "George Saunders is a writer who has defined literary satire of the new millennium [and] will continue to do so" (579). The comparisons to West, Vonnegut, and Huxley do not necessarily provide a common ground these writers share; but, the recognition of Saunders as a leading contemporary satirist in the current era is one that invites many questions, specifically with regard to his relationship to postmodernism.

In 2015, book critic David Ulin asked, "Did postmodernism kill literary satire?", pondering whether it is merely a coincidence "that the rise of postmodernism in the 1970s overlaps almost exactly the decline of satire" (n.p.). If, as Ulin wonders, postmodernism did kill literary satire, we should not be surprised to see satire return in the new millennium, an era when postmodernism seems to have waned. As I argue, Saunders is at the forefront of this change. A living writer considered to be a second-generation postmodernist, Saunders'

distinctive satire thus lies in a precarious position with regards to classification and cultural importance. As a result, I have chosen to focus on Saunders' satire because his fiction seems to best exemplify a style that carefully borrows elements from both modernism and postmodernism in an attempt to propose a future for American fiction that is not bound by the techniques of postmodernism. His deployment of satire appears to work beyond both its traditional and its postmodern uses, thus situating Saunders' fiction (and literary satire in general) in an uncertain place at the turn of the millennium. But, if Saunders' fiction is a response to the failures of literary postmodernism, in what ways does his satire attempt to remedy and/or critique these failings?

While Saunders has expressed indifference to the term, once stating that his reputation as a satirist is a "[s]light thorn in [his] side" (Ward n.p.), it must be stated that no one has failed to recognise Saunders as a satirist, or that his fiction contains satire. Deborah Treisman, for instance, states that Saunders is "one of the only effective social satirists writing today" (qtd. in Siegal 38). Layne Neeper also addresses such questions in his article, "'To Soften the Heart': George Saunders, Postmodern Satire, and Empathy", in which he states that Saunders' "postmodern fiction allows us to delineate a potent strand of the postmodern satiric aesthetic in the new millennium" (281). Neeper appropriately notes a point of difference in the satire of Saunders with that of his twentieth century peers, remarking that Saunders' satire "[ends] with the emergence of some amorphous sense of correction" and "propose[s] the empathetic development of his audience" (281). Many critics understand this affective component to be an integral and distinctive aspect in Saunders' fiction (Millen 2017; Byrne 2013; Basseler 2017). However, in my examination of Saunders' stories, I argue that one of the targets of his satire, American optimism, plays an important role in understanding Saunders' "postmodern satiric aesthetic" (Neeper 281). Further, I establish the complexities of satirising affect while, at the same time, attempting to alter the emotional state of his reader. In exploring the components



of Saunders' satire, particularly by contextualising the subjects of his satire—the Puritan work ethic, positive thinking, neoliberalism, empathy—this thesis ultimately seeks to demonstrate that George Saunders is a hopeful satirist and 'critical optimist', that his satire is directly concerned with the real world, and that his satire possesses an affective component that demarcates it from his contemporaries and predecessors. Further, I seek to establish that Saunders' consistent criticism of America's fascination with positive thinking and self-help is related to his compassionate, affective satire. By replacing a commercialised, helpless, American consciousness with that of a dignified, socially-aware, and empathetic mindset, Saunders' satire attempts to provoke compassionate optimism in his reader.

In Chapter One, "Understanding Satire", I seek to define and contextualise satire to reach an understanding of the term that is appropriate for Saunders' particular style. As I argue, there is a tenuous relationship between Saunders, satire, and postmodernism. Although the majority of scholars contend that satire consists of a large degree of involvement with the real world, others, such as Steven Wiesenberger, insist that postmodern satire does not require this element. Therefore, I seek to locate Saunders' satire outside postmodern satire, arguing that his satire is politically engaged, and reliant on historical and cultural contexts which all collectively dictate its form and target.

In Chapter Two, "Trouble in Paradise: Optimism and Neoliberalism", I continue to focus on what I believe to be Saunders' most important satiric targets: American optimism, and the effects of neoliberalism on human subjectivity. In this respect, I detail the ways in which Saunders' contemporary satire is directly concerned with American history, and how the manufacturing of the American ethos of self-improvement is self-destructive for his characters. Moreover, through an examination of his stories "Pastoralia" and "Exhortation", I analyse the way these targets entwine, with attention to the ways in which Saunders satirises

the discourse of neoliberal, corporate speak, as well as those discourses of positive thinking, self-determination and ‘work ethic’ that contribute to the creation of the helpless neoliberal subject. More specifically, in regard to “Sea Oak”, I contextualise America’s legacy of positive thinking and the economic context of Saunders’ fiction to illuminate how such thinking encourages the negative effects of neoliberalism rather than open a path to success.

In Chapter Three, “‘A Radical Defense of ‘Tenderness’: Saunders’ Affective Amendment,” I contend that Saunders satire engages in moments of affective transformation, but in a manner that poses a number of questions regarding his authorial position, his readers’ sense of choice, and the content of his stories. Beginning with his children’s story *The Very Persistent Gappers of Frip* (2006), I argue that underlying Saunders’ satire is an unwavering advocacy for human kindness and empathy. Indeed, narrative empathy is at work in a number of his stories, particularly “Escape from Spiderhead”. However, while “Spiderhead” is a story that intimately engages with its reader, I assert that it achieves this engagement through cruel, violent means, whereby Saunders’ use of point of view manipulates the story’s content and narrative perspective to construct his narrative empathy. Saunders’ approach thus raises many complexities about empathy, authority, and reading.

Despite the complexities and ambivalence generated by his attempt to access narrative empathy through satire, Saunders has a moral understanding of the purpose of fiction. In recent years, Saunders has eloquently expressed his thoughts on the purpose of fiction and the craft of writing through various workshops, interviews, and videos. Yet, Saunders’ idea of art is most succinctly put in “Mr. Vonnegut in Sumatra”, an essay which appears in *The Braindead Megaphone* (2007). In it, Saunders reflects on his reading experience during the time he was working in Singapore, when he would have to load up on books to take back to his work base, hoping that they would last him until he was able to get more. Saunders begins by

stating that he was, at the time, an “untrained reader” whose understanding of literature was that “great writing is hard reading” (73). “A good literary sentence was like a floor with a hole hidden in it,” he writes (73). For Saunders, reading Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* was a surprise that contradicted his judgement of what literary fiction ought to be. Revelatory in tone, Vonnegut’s novel possesses aliens and a sense of humour out of step with romantic and modernist classics. Whereas Saunders had previously understood art to be “*descriptive* ... a scale model of life”, he now elucidates it to be a “black box” (78). He explains:

Now I began to understand art as a kind of black box the reader enters. He enters in one state of mind and exits in another. The writer gets no points just because what’s inside the box bears some linear resemblance to “real life”—he can put whatever he wants in there. What’s important is that something undeniable and nontrivial happens to the reader between entry and exit. (78)

David Foster Wallace said that, “[f]iction’s about what it is to be a fucking human being” (McCaffery 131). While Saunders does not disagree with Wallace’s viewpoint, this idea of a “black box” connotes more than a mimetic approach to fiction. Indeed, Saunders insists this box is “meant to change us” and have us exit the book “altered” (*Braindead Megaphone* 79). The experience and relationship between writer and reader, in this description, is profoundly intimate and sincere—a clear separation from the cynical nihilism of much postmodern fiction. It seeks to go beyond postmodernism’s irony, attempting to ameliorate in the process.

## Chapter One: Understanding Satire

*There is no more dangerous literary symptom than a temptation to write about wit and humor. It indicates the total loss of both.*

George Bernard Shaw

### Introduction

No study of satire is begun without the acknowledgement of the term's variable nature and its inability to remain within one strict definition. Writer Will Self's response to the *Charlie Hebdo* terrorist attack is a modern example of this. As a reaction to *Charlie Hebdo*'s satirical depiction of the prophet of Islam, Muhammed, on one its magazine covers, two terrorists armed with assault rifles entered the offices of *Charlie Hebdo*, a popular French satirical weekly newspaper, and opened fire. In the wake of the attack, Self sought to respond to the question of what satire is, thus calling into question the comedic and political style of *Charlie Hebdo*'s cartoon:

[T]he question needs to be asked: were the cartoonists at *Charlie Hebdo* really satirists, if by satire is meant the deployment of humour, ridicule, sarcasm and irony in order to achieve moral reform? Well, when the issue came up of the Danish cartoons I observed that the test I apply to something to see whether it truly is satire derives from H. L. Mencken's definition of good journalism: it should "afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted". The trouble with a lot of so-called "satire" directed against religiously-motivated extremists is that it's not clear who it's afflicting, or who it's comforting. (Self n.p.)

Self is uncertain that satire as he knows it—that which is deployed for moral reform—is in effect in the case of *Charlie Hebdo*, but he is just as uncertain as to whether his own definition is still adequate for contemporary satire. Self's application of Mencken's definition applies to 'good' satire, but it is perhaps too specific to be a general definition, or a working framework

for understanding Saunders' satire. What is evident is that classifying satire, and thus also defining it, has become increasingly difficult.

Interestingly, Self's recourse to Mencken's definition is implicit also in the reported artistic intentions of both David Foster Wallace and George Saunders. In a 2000 interview with *Publishers Weekly*, Saunders said that "art should comfort the oppressed and oppress the comfortable" (Bahr 322). Wallace, in his oft-quoted interview with Larry McCaffery, shares that one of his creative writing teachers once told him: "good fiction's job is to comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable" (McCaffery 127). This expression, however, is actually misattributed to H. L. Mencken. It first appeared in Finley Peter Dunne's *Observations by Mr. Dooley* in 1902, where Dunne describes how journalism "comforts th' afflicted, afflicts th' comfortable" (Dunne 39). In any case, it is an aphorism that found its way into the minds of American writers at the turn of the millennium. For these writers, fiction has an explicit purpose, and so too does satire. The Roman poet Juvenal, one of the most famous practitioners of formal verse satire, famously claimed that "It is hard not to write satire" (Juvenal 4). The audience of satire is comprised of spectators for whom an art form does not exist just for art's sake. Moreover, the satirist is not merely compelled to write satire but also conducts their art with a vigour born out of a feeling of necessity. "For who is so tolerant," continues Juvenal, "of the unjust City, so steeled, that he can restrain himself..." (4). The satirist's urge to tell others of their dissatisfaction outweighs all restraint. The abundance of stupidity, vices, and human folly that exist within society cannot, for the satirist, be simply ignored. In short, satire must be connected to a kind of social function.

### The Material of Satire

First, there are indeed characteristics of satire that, when surveyed, constitute an argument for the type of material that a satirist is drawn toward. The satirist's image of the world is not necessarily the same as those of other artists. "Like other arts," writes Leonard Feinberg, "the best satire is concerned with the nature of reality" (1967: 3). M. D. Fletcher states that satire is a "mode of aesthetic expression that relates to historical reality [and] involves at least implied norms against which a target can be exposed as ridiculous" (Fletcher ix).<sup>1</sup> With regard to the perspective of a satirist, then, the "nature of reality" situates the perspective as wide, all-encompassing, and concerned with the nature of being. Indeed, Matthew Hodgart affirms this, stating: "The perennial topic of satire is the human condition itself" (Hodgart 10). The human condition, as viewed by the satirist, is one not necessarily of joy, awe, or amazement. Rather, it is a concerned gaze at society.

Satire is, in its most basic form, a critique. The subject of satire's critique is most often dissimulation. In viewing the human condition, the satirist is unable to avoid the dissimulation of society, its individuals, communities, and organisations. "Pretense and hypocrisy permeate satiric literature," observes Feinberg, "because pretense and hypocrisy are ... inescapable attributes of man and society" (1967: 23). Feinberg's argument is an appropriate one to apply to Saunders' approach to satire. Feinberg argues that dissimulation is the result of "man's [sic] pretense that he is always motivated by the ideal, the moral, the good, never by the actual, immoral, the evil" (23). Feinberg asserts that, by avoiding the admission of immoral

---

<sup>1</sup> These remarks by Feinberg and Fletcher are important in understanding the relevance of reality and objectivity in satire, more specifically with regard to the movement of postmodernism. Frederic Jameson characterises postmodernism by its "historical deafness" (Jameson xi) and its, "weakening of historicity, both in our relationship to public History and in the new forms of our private temporality" (6). These complications of satire's relationship to postmodernism will be addressed later in the chapter.

motivation, humankind is always under the influence of an ideal, which is permitted by simultaneously believing that evil is temporary and that life's unpleasant periods are merely a transition toward something better. In short, human values become subjected to misrepresentation for the sake of persisting with a perspective of the world that prohibits a direct acknowledgement of the real. The result of this is a conflict between what is desired and what is real, a "double standard in the structure of society" (24). The success of individuals in society does not necessarily equate with a path of established norms and common morality. Material success, for instance, is not governed by morality, and many people have risen to prosperity with ideals unchecked by morality—the common practice of a standard that is at odds with what is accepted. This double standard constitutes the dominant focus of satire. It is an unavoidable conflict as, one can argue, it is impossible for one to not deviate from standards and norms one professes to follow. As such, society will always be a source of material for the satirist for no society, no matter how enlightened, is excluded from dissimulation, vices, and human folly.

### **The Satirist**

By using such material, satire thus corresponds to the real world, and as a result, so does satire's influence. Juvenal's belief that "It is hard *not* to write satire" is often connected with an understanding that the satirist is obliged to write under the influence of their morality. It is understood that morality is the focus for the satirist and is necessary component for a work to be a satire, or contain satirical elements in combination with other rhetorical devices. Northrop Frye believes satire "takes a high moral line" (1944: 224) whilst according to George Meredith, the satirist is a "moral agent" (44). In Gary Percese's interview with Saunders, he begins by asking: "Do you see yourself as a satirist? Are you a moralist? How do you

understand these terms?” (Percesepe n.p.).<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, Rueben Quintero states that the satirist “write[s] not merely out of personal indignation, but with a sense of moral vocation and with a concern for the public interest” (1). Satirists are not silently dissatisfied but compelled to express their criticism. Seeing injustice, the satirist attempts to criticise those they believe deviate from a society’s moral norms. The satiric target is thus a transgressor of moral law; the satirist its custodian.

Yet, there are arguments against the idea that the satirist is a moral agent, or one who is even primarily concerned with the nature of reality, for there exists no scholarly consensus on the matter. The motivation of a satirist, argues Leonard Feinberg, is not necessarily morality, especially when compared to other writers. On the nature of the satirist’s intent, Feinberg writes that: “[H]is immediate purpose is to satirize, not to improve; his object in showing the ridiculous is to criticize, not to correct ... The satirist, then, functions as an artist, not as a moralist” (1963: 40-1). It is not possible, of course, to assert with any real conviction the intent behind George Saunders’ works. However, Saunders has stated with regard to Orwell, that he was “liberated by the idea that this sort of satire could be Art” (Saunders and Derby 91). It is clear that in this case, at least, his satirical motivation is concerned not solely with aesthetics or moral order, but with both. Dustin Griffin offers a clearer response to the

---

<sup>2</sup> Saunders’ reply is not unlike other satirists who are indifferent to the term and refrain from viewing themselves as such: “I’ve never really thought of myself as a satirist. My goals are pretty much the goals of the serious literary fiction writer. But I found out early on that for me to do that work, I had to use humor. I think this is because the world feels comic to me – not funny, necessarily, but comic, i.e., weirdly designed, given our basic human desires for love, dignity, continuity, order” (Percesepe n.p.). Importantly, a satirist’s motivation is relevant, but their intent does not determine whether a work is satire or not.



uncertainty of the “satirist as moralist” (Pollard 3) by removing the intent of moralism, conservatism, and radicalism—all descriptions attributed to a satirist’s intent:

... there is little evidence that a satirist is typically motivated by clearly articulated political principles, or even by what might now be called political ideology ... Indeed, it is likely that satirists’ concerns are more literary than political, that they write satires because they think it will advance their careers by winning audiences or patrons. (1994: 149-50)

Morality is undoubtedly a feature of satiric literature, but it is one that does not constitute the whole of its purpose so cannot thus be reduced to its sole motivation. To construct satire for the purpose of art, or solely for aesthetic reasons, is one response to the unanswerable question of a satirist’s motivation and intent.

More importantly, however, both of these theories do still deviate from the poetics and sociocultural conditions of postmodernism. This is indeed my point, which I will elaborate on later. Regardless of a satirist’s purpose—whether it be morality or invective, political or radical—the satirist still requires the acknowledgment of moral norms in order to criticise, irrespective of one’s moral opinion (as the satirist is well-aware of such moral relativism). Subsequently, the aesthetic value of satire as art for art’s sake is, too, dependant on a foundation of shared values—a centre which allows comparisons to those which lie outside of its order, such as the grotesque and ridiculous. Indeed, although Feinberg stipulates that the satirist functions “as an artist, not a moralist,” he supports this view, stating that the satirist, “[uses] for his material the moral values accepted by his society because satire deals with deviations from a norm – an actual or a pretended norm” (41). The two categories are not mutually exclusive. Before acknowledging the tenuous relationship between the material of satire with postmodernism, I endeavour to construct an understanding of satire.

### Toward Definition

According to George Saunders, satire is “the inverse praise of good things” (Z. Smith n.p.).<sup>3</sup> This definition reveals Saunders’ strong moral and optimistic stance. The focus of Saunders’ critique is not that which is being critiqued, but the sincere expression of values that Saunders deems worthy of praise—an optimistic view toward irony’s purpose. However, in reaching a more scholarly definition of the term, one finds that satire, due to its miscellaneous nature, is notoriously difficult to define. As a word, satire entered the English language in 1509, and since then its representations have consistently been multiplied, reworked, and often misunderstood (Worcester 3). For the average reader, it would seem difficult to have a grasp on what a writer is doing with satire’s ingredients, how they are utilised, and to what effect. Nor is the critic immune to the variability of satire’s form. Satire is arguably incapable of holding one definition. Whichever definition is used is most likely too broad, or not broad enough. It can be a genre of a literature whilst simultaneously being a mode or tone that can be used *within* many other literary genres. According to many scholars writing on satire in the 1960s—mainly with regard to works of Horace, Juvenal, Dryden, Swift and Pope—satire is an inherently moral art form that is composed of varying rhetorical devices. Yet, the aforementioned remarks from Feinberg and Griffin contest the importance of morality’s role. *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (2015) defines satire in its opening sentence as: “A mode of writing that exposes the failings of individuals, institutions, or societies to ridicule and scorn” (Baldick n.p.) Certainly, this is our most common understanding of it: satire exposes vice or folly. The means by which it goes about such criticism and the exposure of failings is where the critic comes to a turbulent area that intersects with various other literary techniques.

---

<sup>3</sup> This quote is not from Saunders directly, but from the preface to an interview with Saunders conducted by Zadie Smith for *Interview Magazine* (Z. Smith, 2017).

To its end, satire employs wit, ridicule, and irony in order to make its point, whilst also entering the territory of the comic and parody.

There are definitions of satire that apply to some writers but not to others. Some may seem perfectly apt in describing the works of Pope, Dickens, and Byron, but unhelpful at analysing and understanding the works of Aldous Huxley, George Orwell, Kurt Vonnegut, or George Saunders. This definition issue, despite the examples of writers just mentioned, is not confined within generations, as even one writer's satire may seem completely at odds with his or her contemporaries. Achieving a consensus as to what satire *is*, is more difficult when supposed satirists often refuse to be described as such. In a 1969 interview, Kurt Vonnegut expressed indifference to the term:

I speak a lot at universities now, and people ask me to define 'satire' and, you know? I've never even been bothered to look it up. I wouldn't know whether I'm a satirist or not. One thing about being a chemistry major at Cornell, I've never worried about questions like that. It was never important to me whether I was one or not. (Vonnegut, *Conversations* 4)

Indeed, whilst people who write poetry call themselves poets, and those who write novels are novelists, satirists, "often refuse to admit they are satirists" (Feinberg, 1963: 289). Instead, many satirists purport that their worldview is sincere. "It is worth mentioning," writes Feinberg, "that many satirists believe, or pretend to believe, that they are not satirists at all, but realists" (1967: 63). Aldous Huxley, for instance, viewed himself as "by nature a natural historian" (Bald 4). Moreover, when screenwriter and humourist Charlie Brooker was questioned about satire's relevance in 2016, he interrupted the interviewer to say: "I hate that word," then continued to say he does not consider himself a satirist (Brooker n.p.). Satire and its practitioners are thus remarkably elusive, albeit not in all cases for the same reasons.

In an episode of British comedian Stewart Lee's television show, *Stewart Lee's Comedy Vehicle*, Lee performs a set that attempts to explain satire. Lee states: "*Planet of the Apes* is the same as here, but there's apes in it. And that's what a satire is. If anyone ever says to you, 'What's a satire?' ... A satire is when it's the same as here, but there's animals in it" (Lee, 2014: n.p.). Lee's joke definition is offered as a means to better understand *Parliament of the Fowls* by Geoffrey Chaucer, and to introduce *Animal Farm* by the writer he describes as the "best at satirising things," George Orwell (n.p.). This is, of course, a stand-up comedy performance. It is not a rigorous, academic answer as to what satire, as a genre or mode, actually is. However, Lee does go on to give his understanding of it more substance, by saying:

But don't get carried away, London, not everything with animals in it is a satire. Don't get carried away, people at home, if you're out and about and you see a little vole by the canal, cleaning its whiskers. Don't be looking at it thinking, "Is this supposed to be... uh, "Theresa May?" It doesn't know. The vole doesn't know what that is, it's not interested. Not all animals are trying to satirise things, do you understand? (Lee n.p.)

Lee's attempt to explain satire satirises the attempt to explain satire. Defining satire is, in this case, his satiric target. In doing so, Lee exposes the tiresome nature of analysing and explaining satire by providing a strawman definition ("there's animals in it"); then, later in the show, undercuts the premise as he is being interrogated by notable satirist Chris Morris as to whether certain things are satirical, such as "an ostrich in a soda siphon" and a "wolf with a duck in it" (n.p.). Despite the absurdity and comic nature of Lee's explanation and his humorous examples that close out the show, Lee highlights and satirises that almost-unknowability of what satire is, what its effect is, and how it functions within certain artistic disciplines, both as humour and a means of political critique.

More scholarly opinions on the matter are all in agreement with satire's multiplicity and its ability to escape a stable configuration. Indeed, Don Nilsen likens it to pornography: "Satire is like pornography; we know it when we see it. And like pornography, some people see it everywhere, and other people don't see it anywhere at all" (Nilsen 1). Moreover, Lisa Coletta believes satire to be "one of the most capacious and most misunderstood literary terms" (Coletta 856). In agreement with Nilsen, Leonard Feinberg informs us that satire, "is such a protean species of art that no two scholars use the same definition or the same outline of ingredients" (Feinberg 5), whilst Gerald O'Connor believes that satire: "exists as a literary genre, the real problem being not in finding it but in defining it" (O'Connor 216). Therefore, with respect to the kaleidoscopic nature of the term, I endeavour not to define satire, but to circumscribe an understanding of satire using multiple definitions in order to classify and compare, at least to a certain extent, the key components of satire with the satiric techniques used in Saunders' fiction. This avoidance of a conclusive definition is because, as fluid and contested as satire's definitions are, questions still remain as to the word's origin. G. L. Hendrickson inconveniently states that: "Few of us I imagine are conscious that in using the series 'satire,' 'satiric,' 'satirist,' 'satirize,' we are dealing with words that are unrelated etymologically" (1971: 49). It is understood satire derives its name from *satura*, which means "full," "mixture," and a "medley of different things" (Lindvall 21); and, more specifically, *lanx satura*, which associates the miscellany of *satura* with food—a dish full of mixed fruit (a type of salad) offered to the god was called *lanx satura* (Highet 231). The intrinsic aspect stressed by this original derivation is thus one of variety, miscellany, and mixture.

Scholars of the term, however, also acknowledge its other supposed derivation, that of *satyr*, which was used by Renaissance writers who understood that the poetic form was the product of ancient Greek *satyr* plays, thus providing a rather different understanding of satire. Alvin Kernan demonstrates this, writing: "The idea that poetic satire had its origin in a

dramatic form distinguished for its viciousness of attack and spoken by rough satyrs was the basis for nearly all Elizabethan theories of satire” (1959: 55). Perceiving the word’s origin to be connected to that of a mythological Greek god with characteristics of a horse or goat, sixteenth-century English writers hence continued the variable nature of the term with great polarity. However, with consideration to its different variations, I wish explore satire’s miscellany—its ‘salad-like’ nature—as essential in understanding the varying scholarly definitions and, as a result, the techniques which attempt to satisfy its nature. Leonard Feinberg opines that there is not, unfortunately, a universally accepted definition of satire (1963: 6). For the sake of alluding to what he means by the term, however, he explains that: “The technique of the satirist consists of a *playfully critical distortion of the familiar*” (7). This explanation is most appropriate for discussing Saunders, whose mix of surreal abstraction with real-world criticism is finely tuned—an embodiment of the satire’s salad-like nature. Indeed, Saunders says his draws a picture of the world that is “inconsistently distorted, more fun-house mirror than shrinking ray ... like a scale model, but melted” (Siegal 39).

With regard to my earlier expression that satire is primarily concerned with humanity and reality, much like other artistic disciplines, there is a clear distinction required in order to differentiate the composition of satire from other techniques. Firstly, it is worth considering the definition that has most widely been used in understanding satire, and to do so I turn to Northrop Frye whose formula has greatly influenced much satire theory in the twentieth century. Frye argues:

The chief distinction between irony and satire is that satire is militant irony ... two things are essential to satire: one is wit or humor, founded on fantasy or a sense of the grotesque or absurd, the other is an object of attack. (Frye, 1971: 233-34)

This interpretation, which I will come back to later in this chapter, does its best to encapsulate that unusual scale on which satire operates. According to Frye, irony is not denotatively satire but it can be subsequently used within satirical works. What constitutes satire is its militancy, which distinguishes it from plain irony. As a form of critique, then, satire is thus understood to be composed of invective; but, the invective is at the mercy of other components, which dictate its strength.

One of the most concise definitions on satire is the translation of the Chinese pictograph for satire: “laughter with knives” (Elkin, 1974: 3). Satire does, in most cases, evoke laughter, but there is a certain amount of insult, derision, and scorn attached to satire’s use. Saunders explains that “humor is what happens when we’re told the truth quicker and more directly than we’re used to” (*Braindead Megaphone* 80). The comic inclination of Saunders indeed produces laughter, but this aspect of his satire—like generative satirists before him—is secondary to his criticism, to his intent of raising awareness. M. H. Abrams, for example, describes satire as: “the literary art of diminishing or derogating a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking toward it attitudes of amusement, contempt, scorn, or indignation” (275). Paul Radin has traced this particular strand—contempt, scorn, and indignation—of satire back to primitive societies:

I know of no tribe where satires or formal narratives avowedly humorous have not attained a rich development. Examples of every conceivable former found, from broad lampoon and crude inventive to subtle innuendo and satire based on man’s stupidity, his gluttony, and his lack of a sense of proportion. (Radin 34)

Indeed, Matthew Hodgart has pushed forward this historical claim with even more specificity by tracing derision, lampoon, and invective in Inuit culture. Within their societies there is the song of derision, a kind of satirical song with the intent of shaming its victim. Hodgart believes

this to be one of the earliest hints of satire in history, and argues that the Inuit satirist has the same intent and method as Alexander Pope: “[T]he man who is worsted in a satirical song-contest will try to reform himself; in extreme cases one can picture him stumbling wretchedly out of the igloo, like Captain Oates on Scott’s polar expedition, to rid the community of its obnoxious burden—which is more than Pope’s victims ever did” (Hodgart 15). Some of this invective is not necessarily solely moral in intent, nor laced with black humour more commonly seen in contemporary satire but, as Hodgart argues, they all contain the germ of moral and political satire; that is, of literature as propaganda for right action (16).

However, by way of revisiting the first part of Abrams’ definition, satire is not simply an attack by way of indignation, nor is its objective merely laughter. Whilst comedy elicits laughter “mainly as an end in itself,” satire ridicules its victim, often by way of exaggeration—using animals, for example—and “uses laughter as a weapon, and against a butt that exists outside the work itself” (Hodgart 275). Indeed, this is perhaps best exemplified in satire’s Roman beginnings, where the poets Juvenal and Horace became notable for critiquing the failings of Rome through formal verse satire. Nevertheless, despite it being referred to as a genre, there are a wide range of satiric modes, and sometimes satire is an incidental element in a text that may not be perceived as wholly satiric, as David Worcester explains:

The spectrum-analysis of satire runs from the red of invective at one end to the violet of the most delicate irony at the other. Beyond either end of the scale, literature runs off into forms that are not perceptible as satire. The ultra-violet is pure criticism; the infra-red is direct reproof or abuse, untransformed by art. (Worcester 16)

Satire therefore exists somewhere within the boundaries of direct criticism and the comic. Juvenalian satire differs from Horatian satire, and other terms also exist in order to understand satire’s diversity, such as formal satire, indirect satire, and Menippean satire. Yet, in its



application, satire has two elements that complete the satiric mode: an amusement at the expense of the subject/victim who is the target of the satire, and a painful awareness that the criticism is valid because there exists an incongruity that needs to be exposed.

The initial criticism seems easily enough to be identifiable, but it is the way a satirist juggles a variety of different techniques that can make their art either genius or entirely incomprehensible; or, depending on the audience—both. “Without style and literary form,” writes Worcester, the “[satirist’s] message would be incomprehensible; without wit and compression it would not be memorable; without high-mindedness it would not ‘come home to men’s business and bosoms’ ” (Worcester 13). Like a mixture of different things—as satire’s etymological roots testify—it is the combination of varying different forms that constitute its makeup. Rhetorical devices used in contrast and toward disparate ends serve to soften the blow of satiric criticism as plain invective, and, in doing so, enhance and simultaneously complicate a piece of satire. Humour and wit are two of these devices.

In attempting to comprehend the nature of many of the words used to describe satire, H. W. Fowler created a table of classification of such terms using not definitions, but their motive, aim, method or means, and their audience.

	<b>MOTIVE or AIM</b>	<b>PROVINCE</b>	<b>METHOD or MEANS</b>	<b>AUDIENCE</b>
humour	Discovery	Human nature	Observation	The sympathetic
wit	Throwing light	Words and ideas	Surprise	The intelligent
satire	Amendment	Morals and manners	Accentuation	The self-satisfied
sarcasm	Inflicting pain	Faults and foibles	Inversion	Victim and bystander
invective	Discredit	Misconduct	Direct statement	The public
irony	Exclusiveness	Statement of facts	Mystification	An inner circle
cynicism	Self-justification	Morals	Exposure of nakedness	The respectable
The sardonic	Self-relief	Adversity	Pessimism	Self

(Fowler 252).

Although some terms are subject to cross-over and parallel classification, Fowler's description of satire's method, that of "accentuation," is of interest. In differentiating satire from pure rhetoric, Dustin Griffin writes: "Like polemical rhetoric, [satire] seeks to persuade an audience that something or someone is reprehensible or ridiculous; unlike pure rhetoric, it engages in exaggeration and some sort of fiction" (Griffin 1). In attempting to expose dissimulation, satire accentuates its target or scene through exaggeration, playfully distorting what is perceived to be real, focusing on the discrepancies between what is considered real and what the satirist deems is real. This leaves space for humour, and exaggeration is often conducted with the use of the ridiculous. It is distortion by exaggeration using understatement or overstatement. Matthew Hodgart interprets this distortion of reality as "abstraction":

[T]rue satire demands a high degree of both commitment to and involvement with the painful problems of the world, and simultaneously a high degree of abstraction from the world ... The satirist does not paint an objective picture of the evils he describes, since pure realism would be too oppressive. Instead he usually offers us a travesty of the situation, which at once directs our attention to actuality and permits an escape from it. (Hodgart 11-12)

Therefore, with this understanding, it is fair to assume that if the satirist was to paint an objective picture of the evils she sees, it might likely be interpreted as pure invective. By *accentuating* the object of her attack through a process of exaggeration, satire is given a possibility of existence, in part due to the borrowing of other elements, such as the comic and irony.

This distortion of reality by way of accentuating the satiric target is evident in Saunders' story, "My Amendment" (*In Persuasion Nation*), the title of which mirrors satire's motive or aim in Fowler's table. It is in the form a letter and is a reply to a recent article written

by someone who disagrees with same-sex marriage. In this satirical piece written by “Ken Byron” (71), Saunders adopts the voice of someone who is also against same-sex marriage, but does so by exaggerating his position on the issue, by asking to not only ban it, but also “propose a supplementary constitutional amendment” (65). Ken’s motivation has been spurred on by “Samish-Sex Marriage”, a phenomenon where heterosexual couples have an imbalance in “masculine and feminine characteristics” (67):

Take, for example, “K,” a male friend of mine, of slight build, with a ponytail. “K” is married to “S,” a tall, stocky female with extremely short hair, almost a crewcut. Often, while watching “K” play with his own ponytail as “S” towers over him, I have wondered, Isn’t it odd that this somewhat effeminate man should be married to this somewhat masculine woman? Is “K” not, on some level, imperfectly expressing a slight latent desire to be married to a man? And is not “S,” on some level, imperfectly expressing a slight latent desire to be married to a woman? (66)

Believing this is not what “God had in mind” (66), Ken has developed a “Manly Scale of Absolute Gender” which “assigns numerical values according to a set of masculine and feminine characteristics” (68). Those who score highly on the scale are recommended by Ken to either divorce, or drastically change their appearance by undertaking the “classic American project of self-improvement” (69). Given the piece’s overt absurdity via hyperbole, it is clear Ken’s voice is not that of Saunders. The object of Saunders’ attack is those who are against same-sex marriage, which is only known by registering the ironic component of the satire.

Furthermore, this process of exaggerating the object of attack is where humour enters the framework. By overstating the case against same-sex marriage, Saunders presents an opinion that does not “paint an objective picture of the evils” he is describing (Hodgart 11). While same-sex marriage is generally understood to be a legal union between two people of the same sex, describing such a situation would not be satirical, hence Saunders’ distortion of

reality by viewing masculinity and femininity as genders in their own right: “I, for one, am sick and tired of this creeping national tendency to let certain types of people take advantage of our national good nature by marrying individuals who are essentially of their own gender” (71). Saunders thus humorously ridicules those against same-sex marriage. For Saunders, satire and earnestness “are actually two manifestations of the same energy” (Saunders and Derby 90). However, Saunders’ satire is certainly subversive and seeks to amend. As Ken’s frustration is increased near the end of the letter, he states: “I, for one, am not about to stand by and let that happen” (71). This statement is not against same-sex marriage, but a rallying cry for it, especially given the context of its publication. Originally published by *The New Yorker* in 2004, “My Amendment” is notably topical, written about a controversial topic. That year, President George W. Bush announced that he would support a constitutional amendment to ban gay marriage in order to protect “the most fundamental institution of civilization” (Stout n.p.). “My Amendment” is perhaps Saunders’ response to Bush, ending on a similar emphatic note, ironically stating that with “suitable correction ... the race will go on” (71). This degree of fictionality is an essential ingredient in satire’s salad-like nature.

Where Hodgart describes satire’s elements of distortion with reference to what he regards as “true satire” (11), Maynard Mack believes that the use of this element in satire is what makes it good: “All good satire, I believe it is fair to say, exhibits an appreciable degree of fictionality” (Mack 193). As such, there is a consensus here with regard to satire’s reality. Satire purposefully creates a reality that, although it appears real, is strikingly hyperbolic. As satire mixes with genres and techniques, it also plays with truth in order to stake its own critique of moral norms. “For all satire,” writes Edward Rosenheim, “involves, to some extent, *a departure from literal truth* and, in place of literal truth, a reliance upon what may be called a *satiric fiction*” (Rosenheim 17; original emphasis). This echoes William Hazlitt’s belief that, “Man is the only animal that laughs and weeps; for he is the only animal that is struck with

the difference between what things are, and what they ought to be” (Hazlitt 65). This incongruity by way of exaggeration invites the comic element into satire’s critique. It is where, to paraphrase Elkin, laughter meets knives. The “satiric fiction” is thus the exaggerated reality that the satirist, more often through understatement, purports to be true; it is presented as realism but its content is not:

This distortion of reality in an attempt to make vice as ugly and ridiculous as it truly is always requires a considerable amount of rhetorical skill, but, as we have seen, in order to establish his credibility the satirist must present himself as a plain, outspoken man who calls a spade a spade (Kernan, 1965: 265).

In calling a spade a spade, the satirist is understating the ridiculous nature of the satire’s exaggeration. *Reductio ad absurdum* (reduction to absurdity), a form of argument in logic, is a device understood to be adapted for satire’s use. It is a method used in disproving a theory by showing that the consequences of such a theory, when carried out, are absurd. It may also accept an opposing proposition but carry such an idea to absurd, unacceptable conclusion, as evidenced by Stewart Lee’s supposition that his audience might start thinking that all animals are satire. Furthermore, the hyperbole in satire is most often directed at victims, systems, or human tendencies—the ‘target’ of the satire. The utopia of a satirist is thus inverted through this ironic, distorted, satirical critique, as Feinberg explains: “Instead of stating what is desirable, he exaggerates the undesirable characteristics of society and pretends that they have produced a satisfying way of life” (Feinberg, 1967: 56). By rendering the satiric target (the ‘real’) as utterly ridiculous, amplified to the point of absurdity, the satirist ironically shows what they consider the ideal. As George Saunders describes it, it is “the inverse praise of good things” (Z. Smith n.p.). By employing extreme forms of exaggeration in combination with irony, the satiric target is made to be ridiculous, therefore arguing that the opposite is not.

By circumscribing many of these common characteristics and definitions of satire, I seek to reduce satire to an understanding of it as, to quote Leon Guilhamet, “a borrower of forms” (14). Satire is, by way of its construction and function, unlike other genres and techniques for its essential make up is that of a compilation. By borrowing many other literary techniques—invective, comic, parody, hyperbole, sarcasm, irony—it must be stressed that satire cannot be confused with the structures and forms it borrows, as during its appropriation of such terms, satire consequently re-works their traditional, generic understandings for its own purpose. As Arthur Pollard observed in 1970, “satire is a chameleon adapting itself to its environment” (22). Guilhamet explains that the instability of satire is due to this appropriation of other forms:

The apparent instability of satire, however, is a normative condition by which the host genres are deformed or restructured to compose the satire. But even in this restructuring those host genres do not lose their internal defining traits. What they do lose is their dominant and defining relationship to the overall literary structure. Instead of dominating, the host genre plays a subordinate role in relation to other generic strategies and to a deforming ironic pattern. (Guilhamet 165)

Whilst in each satire the compilation of each technique may be used to different extents, each technique is, in any case, subsumed by the overall satire. By mixing genres and techniques, there thus exists an incongruity which is unmistakable as satire. For instance, whilst satire borrows invective, it is not actual invective since the employment of other forms, such as comedy and irony, alters invective from being a “direct statement,” as Fowler defines it (252). This also holds true with regard to irony, which in satire is usually personal. In satire, irony is attitudinal and therefore subjective; in tragedy, as in epic and comedy, objective (Snyder 140). Further, although satire consists of a high degree of fantasy and distortion, it is wrong to assume that all distorted writing is satire. As a borrower of forms, then, satire’s best

definition—with exclusion of the *satyr*—is in its varied nature, *lanx satura*. Like a potluck dinner, satire is not the dish you brought to the potluck, nor the others assembled on the dining room table. Rather it is what is on your plate after you have circled the table acquiring some food from each dish and using your selection for what you deem to be the best meal, while silently lamenting the fact that, yet again, Sharon has used gelatine in her lemon cheesecake, and Derek—the new hippie from across the road who spends his recreational time walking tightropes between trees—has put chickpeas in everything. Whilst each plate is a meal compiled from the same selection, each proportion can differ wildly. Saunders’ satire ascribes to satire’s *lanx satura* understanding.

To return to Griffin’s statement regarding satire’s use of exaggeration, it is important to continue his comment, in which he describes satire’s relationship beyond the page:

[S]atire does not forsake the “real world” entirely. Its victims come from that world, and it is this fact (together with a darker or sharper tone) that separates satire from pure comedy ... Finally, satire usually proceeds by means of clear reference to some moral standards or purposes” (Griffin 1).

Indeed, here we have comparisons that expose the varied components of satire, but importantly, as Griffin demonstrates, satire still depends on this exaggerated fiction being connected to the world, still attached to society’s norms and shared values. M. D. Fletcher’s definition subtracts the varied elements of satire in favour of the real: “Satire ... is a verbal aggression in which some aspect of historical reality is exposed to ridicule” (Fletcher ix). Here we have a conflict with Saunders’ work as being postmodern, but also with his fiction—as satires—requiring an objectivity, something postmodernism sought to dispose of. In order to “paint an objective picture of the evils” (Hodgart 11) of society, the satirist must also have a set of norms and values that dictate what is considered evil and good. Indeed, as Maynard Mack declares: “Satire ... asserts the validity and necessity of norms, systematic values, and

meanings that *are* contained by recognizable codes” (Mack 194). With this understanding of satire that I have circumscribed above, it is difficult describe something as a satire, or as satirical, if it is lacking a stable configuration of values and an acceptance of reality, especially those which exist outside of the text itself.

If we are to follow with our understanding of postmodernism’s relationship to historical reality, or lack thereof, as put forth by Frederic Jameson, then the following quote from Edward Rosenheim would seem all but compatible with such a lens:

All satire is not only an attack; it is an attack upon discernible, historically authentic particulars. The “dupes” or victims of punitive satire are no mere fictions. They, or the objects which they represent, must be, or have been, plainly existent in the world of reality; they must, that is, possess genuine historic identity. The reader must be capable of pointing to the world of reality, past or present, and identifying the individual or group, institution, custom, belief or idea which is under attack by the satirist. (Rosenheim 317-18)

Rosenheim, Jr. dictates that one of the requirements of a satirical text is that its content possesses referents in the real world. The targets of satire are, quite simply, real; and they require the reader to understand the signifiers of invective and the irony at work. Indeed, Graham Matthews states: “Within the post-modern era and the accompanying deluge of irony, cynicism and detached enjoyment, critics have bemoaned the loss of real world referent amidst a sea of simulacra (Matthews 1). Rosenheim’s explanation of satire’s required reliance on external norms and frameworks, that which he describes as “historically authentic particulars,” is most definitely at odds with postmodernism which proposes that art cannot be concerned with nature or reality for they are “merely social constructs” (Hicks 258).



### Satire and Postmodernism

Responses to the *Charlie Hebdo* attack were varied. While many around the world adopted the slogan and logo “Je suis Charlie” (“I am Charlie” in English) as a way of simultaneously expressing grief and advocating for freedom of the press, some looked outside the margins, calling into question the use and relevance of contemporary satire. Just over a week after the *Charlie Hebdo* shooting, David Ulin, writing for the *Los Angeles Times*, wrote an article entitled “Has America turned into a spoof of itself?”, which begins with a question which Ulin says he was made to ponder after the attacks in Paris: “Did postmodernism kill literary satire?” (n.p.). This question, posed in regard to postmodernism, is undoubtedly a response to irony, an attitude which postmodernism pushed to the forefront of American literary fiction in the second-half of the twentieth century. The ubiquity of irony in American fiction is well-known, but Ulin’s connection to satire, a similar form to irony, is worthy of exploration. “Is it a coincidence,” Ulin ponders, “that the rise of postmodernism in the 1970s overlaps almost exactly with the decline of satire? Is it a coincidence that after the turmoil of the late 1950s and 1960s ... we turned inward, forgoing satire for irony?” (n.p.). Ulin references Joseph Heller’s *Catch 22* (1961) and Kenneth Patchen’s *Memoirs of a Shy Pornographer* (1945), among others, in speculating on what he sees as the failure of the United States to heed the advice offered by its popular satirists, be they Benjamin Franklin or Mark Twain. Instead, it now seems that more people look back at many absurd and surreal satirical works as if they were not absurd at all: “Do we even need to say that, 70 years later, in a world of bots and tweets and news feeds, such an idea hardly seems outrageous?” (n.p.). Despite Ulin rhetorically suggesting that many satirist’s fears often reach fulfilment anyway, the production of satire has not waned in recent times.

For its insistence on stable values, and its inherent aim to apply some form of moral judgement, satire can thus be understood to be in contention with the popular techniques of

postmodernism. As I will explore, there is indeed a tenuous and fragile relationship between the standards and values that inform what we have come to call postmodern literature and the nature of satire. The traits of postmodernism—more specifically its criticism of objective reality, morality, and truth—come into significant conflict with satire, a corrective genre with prerequisites of ethical certainty, moral standards, and historical reality. M. D. Fletcher remarks that this is presumably why, at the end of the twentieth century, we heard a great deal about “black humor, absurd humor, cosmic satire, and absolute irony, but little about satire as it is defined here” (Fletcher ix). This observation is crucial in understanding how the very nature of satire is at odds with the movement of literary postmodernism. Sub-genres such as cosmic satire and black humour began to flourish in the twentieth century, attempting to supplant and negotiate a space for art that is, at least to a certain degree, corrective in nature such as satire. Be that as it may, in spite of the many works described thus, it is still not satire as we know it. John W. Tilton, in his study of the contemporary novel, most succinctly describes cosmic satire as at variance with satire: “Cosmic satire has no corrective or utilitarian function. It recognises no ‘arm against fantasy,’ for it finds man’s ailment incurable. Each of the cosmic satirists conveys his conviction that man will always find fantasy of illusion preferable to reality” (Tilton 19). Indeed, this refusal to acknowledge (a) reality is a theme throughout many works of cosmic satire and black humour in the twentieth century.

As a result, there is a conspicuous lack of purely satiric works in the mid-twentieth century and even more notable absence of the lack of enquiry as to satire’s place in literary theory during this time. Susan Lever writes that: “There has hardly been an important critical study of satire in English since 1970, when the term was applied pretty well exclusively to eighteenth century practice. In fact, satire has often been dismissed as one of the museum genres of the past” (Lever 215). When considering famous satiric works, one looks back to Jonathan Swift, Alexander Pope, and Mark Twain, to name a few. Rarely will one conjure up

a brilliant work of literary satire in the past century without affixing to its description a sub-genre. In 1993, Walter Poznar, after observing that the contemporary American novel has failed to produce a work comparable to classical satirists, asks: “Where in American society is a potential satirist to find those values from which to challenge society?” (Poznar n.p.) The values Poznar is referring to are those moral and ethical norms that Quintero, Hodgart, and Frye all spoke of with regard satire’s ingredients. Quintero emphatically states that, “satire cannot function without a standard against which readers can compare its subject,” appending the following question to his statement: “How could we perceive something as ridiculous, monstrous, wicked, or absurd without having a comparative sense of what would not be the case?” (Quintero 3). By arguing that typical protagonists in American novels suffer from ethical confusion, Poznar elaborates on this “spiritual bankruptcy” and absence of norms by noting that: “[C]ontemporary American novelists wander aimlessly in a darkening wasteland with little if any expectation that they can escape the nightmarish inferno of the modern world” (n.p.). Furthermore, Susan Strehle writes that, “[C]ontemporary satiric fiction “indicts without consoling; it finds large scope for unchecked greed and virtually none for ethical values” (Strehle 145). This criticism targets the postmodern condition which prohibits objective meaning and implied norms—both notable features of satire. “Satirical texts,” writes Paul Simpson, “are inextricably bound up with context of situation, with participants in discourse and with frameworks of knowledge” (Simpson 1). For Poznar, the American novel, influenced by the discourse of postmodernism, is without meaning, for all of its meaning is interpretative and subjective. Indeed, in beginning his study of mid-to-late twentieth century fiction, Charles Harris asserts that: “The belief that ours is an absurd universe, chaotic and without meaning, is perhaps the dominant theme of the modern American novel” (6). Poznar’s article, then, contains criticism that needs explanation; and perhaps, a response.

In 1995, Steven Weisenburger published one of the very few large studies on twentieth century satire, *Fables of Subversion: Satire and the American Novel, 1930-1980*. In response to the aforementioned definitions of satire, Weisenburger's study challenges what has, since classical times, been our common understanding of satire. *Fables of Subversion* argues against the formalist New Critics—Northrop Frye, Alvin Kernan, Maynard Mack, and Robert C. Elliot—who all refrained from allowing new interpretations of satire theory that deviated from it as a moral, normative and corrective mode or genre. Many writers, Weisenburger is correct to point out, questioned the absence of satire in the twentieth century (2); Alan Wilde referred to it in 1981 as “a minor form in modern times” (Wilde 28), whilst many others saw cosmic satire and black humor as topical—appropriate sub-genres to supplant the original. Weisenburger thus sought to rectify the conspicuous absence of traditional satire in the twentieth century, establishing a theory of satire that splits the mode into two categories: *generative* satire, and *degenerative* satire. His argument is founded on the idea that, unlike the American literary establishment's theory of satire in the previous century, satire was not a “minor form” in the twentieth century, nor that satire had gone “stale and mouldy” and unable to “speak for the twentieth century” (Frye, 1944: 78). “Satire,” Weisenburger succinctly states, “could not address the central anxieties of modernity and even seems complicitous with the worst forms of modern, propagandistic consensus-building” (2). Traditional understandings of satire had left it, as a mode and genre, unfit for the contemporary era. Although satire had become disconnected from its traditional, classical roots, it had not vanished with the advent of postmodernism. Instead, such satire of the twentieth century is identifiable as “degenerative” satire, a “subversive mode” that participates in oppositional work and stands outside clear relations to signifiers and the consensus-building approach of its traditional understanding (Weisenburger 19). For Weisenburger, the traditional framework of satire required adjustment. On viewing Burgess, Barth, and Vonnegut as “conventional social

satirists,” Tilton recognises the difficulty of discerning what constitutes satire: “[T]he problem is that no theory of conventional or traditional satire, based as it must be upon past satirical practice, can possibly embrace the contemporaneity of their satire” (Tilton 14). This is what Weisenburger seeks to address. However Tilton’s study is concerned with cosmic satire which “though often hilariously comic”, is a satire that has profoundly “tragic overtones”—a type of “tragic satire” (19).

By contrast, Weisenburger’s definition of “generative” satire is comparable to the definitions I have mentioned above—those by formalist New Critics who, despite each of them favouring one element more than the other, all understood satire to be corrective, normative, rhetorical, and that it has an object or target for its attack. The works of Swift and Twain, for example, function as generative satire, artists whose fiction points out folly and vice through humour and are composed with a corrective intent amid an understanding of implied norms. Weisenburger’s “generative” model of satire aims to “construct consensus, and to deploy irony in the work of stabilizing various cultural hierarchies” (Weisenburger 1). Writers such as Pynchon and Gaddis, in contrast, do so in a degenerative mode: “to subvert hierarchies of value and to reflect suspiciously on all ways of making meaning, including [their] own” (3). Weisenburger considers degenerative satire as a wholly “postmodern phenomenon” where, although its historical targets appear absent, this is because its “infections erupt *mainly within*, amid discursive activity itself, and are therefore identified with semiotic practices of which the text is itself an instance” (19). However, meaning and objectivity are not missing in these texts. Just as postmodern thought attempts to deny “the existence of an authoritative prescription of ‘the good’ or the possibility of constructing one” (Fletcher ix), degenerative satire’s purpose is to “subvert hierarchies of values” through a suspicion of all knowledge and ways of representation, including its own (Weisenburger 3). This is why, to a certain extent, many postmodern writers have sought to construct narratives that attempt to exist outside of

the text through metafiction and a conflation of narrator and author. The degenerative satirist perceives language itself as a dissimulation and yet expresses this using language—a paradox that implies awareness of a text's limitations.

To support his theory of postmodern satire, Weisenburger turns to P. K. Elkin's *The Augustan Defence of Satire* (1973) wherein Elkin proposes that Augustans comprehended satire as "historically relative," and that distinct ages seemed to have wildly different ideas about it (Elkin 1973: 35). Why, then, should American postmodern satirists be restricted from utilising satire as a means to delegitimise and interrogate the very structures which satire was understood to require as stable? Weisenburger's answer comes back to "the desire of formalist New Critics to generalize [satire's] elements by comparing masterworks from selected epochs" (Weisenburger 9). In this view, the textbook definition of satire was so limiting, and the hold of formalist New Critics over the term so strong that, when the definition was no longer seen as suited for postmodern works, such a realisation was taken "as a sign, not of something new in literary satire, but of satire's demise" (11). When postmodern satire no longer seemed aligned with satire in its rhetorical, corrective, and normative functions, then the work often seemed best described as black humor or cosmic satire; Susan Strehle goes so far as to label the works of Pynchon, Gaddis, DeLillo, Barth, Coover, and Barthelme as "postnormative" satirists (145)—satire that exists beyond convention and without the values Frye and Kernan argue as indispensable. J. Green affirms this lack of moral focus in postmodern fiction, stating that: "West, Gaddis, and DeLillo raise dissenting voices, but without presupposing a clear moral or social norm against which to measure current deviance" (2005: 186). In short, postmodernism's influence on literature, through assumptions of metaphysical and ethical uncertainty, did not permit satire an opportunity to enter the mainstream without criticism of its reliance on objectivity and norms, which were subject to endless deconstruction. Yet, the deconstruction of language is the targeted aggression that Weisenburger points to as a chief

distinction between generative and degenerative satire, for degenerative satire takes aim not at particulars outside of the work, but *within*, subverting the very fiction that is being created (19). One may point to this as no longer being corrective or rhetorical; however, Weisenburger criticises how with one hand “literary theory denied satire the rights of mutability and ambiguity, while with the other it granted those rights to irony” (22), hence the question raised by Poznar about satire’s absence in American fiction.

I have attempted to establish a background of both traditional definitions of satire coupled with introducing a contemporary theory of satire that posits a revisiting of those traditional definitions. This is because, although the many descriptions of Saunders remarked on his likeness to greats such as Vonnegut and Twain, I argue that Saunders is interestingly unlike these two. Firstly, as I will soon discuss, Saunders does possess the generative mode of Twain and Vonnegut. However, unlike Twain, Saunders operates within (and outside of) the postmodern and remains playful with metafictional elements. The similarities between Vonnegut and Saunders are numerous, even with regard to their chosen religion, Buddhism. However, whilst Saunders and Vonnegut quite obviously pick apart at the fabrics of the American ethos—the American Dream, Puritan Work Ethic, capitalism—Vonnegut extends his awareness of life’s problems with an admission that life’s problems are unable to be resolved; or, at the very least, appears devoid of hope. In contrast, Saunders too, like any satirist, campaigns for awareness, but he does so with a firm, critical perspective of how positive thinking, and American optimism operate, then seeks to leave his reader with something—a feeling of hope.

### Saunders and Postmodernism

I have referred to George Saunders earlier as a second-generation postmodernist. If one is reluctant to call for the end of postmodernism, one may be more inclined to categorise postmodern writers as consisting of multiple generations in a larger movement, as David Cowart has done: “From writers born in the 1920s to those born (virtually) yesterday, one discerns three or so generations of postmodern literary endeavour” (Cowart 29). Postmodernism, in this sense, is ridiculously robust: able to engulf at least three generations of artists despite many of the second- and third-generation postmodernists being aware of, and arguably resistant to, postmodernism’s aesthetic grasp. Writers whose work began to appear after the Second World War are those often considered to be of the first generation, a period which saw the United States move from being an industrial to post-industrial economy (Jameson 53). Kurt Vonnegut, fellow satirist and a strong influence in George Saunders’ work, is of this earlier ilk. Joseph Heller and Gilbert Sorrentino, among others, are considered Vonnegut’s contemporaries, along with—albeit a little younger—the likes of Don DeLillo, Toni Morrison, Cormac McCarthy, and Thomas Pynchon.

Dividing prominent postmodern writers by generation does little to affirm postmodernism’s end given the effervescence with which some, albeit now only a few, first-generation postmodernists are still writing and publishing. Regardless, the second wave of writers, those of whom were born in the 1940s and 1950s, sought to displace the postmodern aesthetics as the literary dominant. Following David Cowart’s approach, Alice Walker (born in 1944), Richard Powers (1957), Gloria Naylor (1950), Tim O’Brien (1946), Donald Antrim (1958), and George Saunders (1958) are among those considered second-generation postmodernists. Writers born in the 1960s and whose work was published in the 1980s, such as Chuck Palahniuk (1962), Dave Eggers (1970) and David Foster Wallace (1962), are the third. This mentioning of various writers serves only to categorise certain stylistic shifts within



American literary postmodernism and is subsequently no more than a guideline, as one may think of postmodernism itself. Whilst David Foster Wallace was born in the 1960s, he was published at a very young age (*The Broom of the System* in 1987 for instance); George Saunders is four years younger, but his first short story collection was published in 1996. Contextual factors such as this are valuable so as not to emphasise age over publication date.

By categories of age, output of work, and literary style, George Saunders occupies a liminal position among America's writers at the end of the twentieth century. His fiction is not believed to be part of the early postmoderns, such as Vonnegut, Pynchon, or DeLillo, but nor is he situated with contemporary younger writers such as Joshua Ferris, Karen Russell, or Jonathan Safran Foer. While Saunders' contemporaries, as a result of age, may be seen as Wallace, Jonathan Franzen, and Chuck Palahniuk, among others, his aesthetics—particularly his satire and insistence on writing short stories over novels—is less concerned with directly responding to postmodernism (such as Wallace sought to) than it is proposing a unique style of satire in the current era. As a result of this, there is a clear transition in Saunders' work from navigating the achievements of postmodernism—pastiche, blankness, sense of exhaustion, irony, rejection of history, acute self-consciousness (Gitlin 100)—with a renewal of sincerity and affect sometimes associated with post-postmodernism, whatever that may be.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Often viewed his artistic manifesto, David Foster Wallace's essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" outlines his frustrations with the metafictional games of postmodernism. In it, he states that: "The real literary 'rebels' in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of anti-rebels, born oglers who dare somehow to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles. Who treat of plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction" (Wallace 1998: 81). Adam Kelly refers to this response as a "New Sincerity" in American fiction, a categorisation that situates Wallace's work (along with the fiction of his contemporaries Dave Eggers, Zadie Smith, Jonathan Safran Foer, among others) outside of postmodernism (Kelly, 2016: 198).

Those who pursue the idea of ‘American literature’ indulge in the idea that it is part of something bigger, yet it simultaneously resists the desire to be classified—national exceptionalism constantly meets staunch individualism. Stephen Burn illustrates this impulse with regard to American writers who became associated with the rise of postmodernism in the mid-twentieth century, believing they were: “unusual not just in their self-conscious efforts to classify their relationship to literary history, but also in their tendency to dramatise that self-consciousness within their fiction” (Burn 2). Indeed, as Brian McHale’s asserts: “From the very outset, postmodernism was self-conscious about its identity as a period, conscious of its own historicity, because it conceived of itself as historical” (McHale n.p.). For writers emerging from the shadows of such postmodern greats as Thomas Pynchon, John Barth, and Robert Coover, the desire was to regard postmodernism’s poetics as the style guide to which their own art should adhere to and emulate. The 1990s was, as Stephen Burn describes it: “a transitional decade, torn between the emergence of a generation of writers seeking to move beyond postmodernism and the prolonged vitality of many writers ... associated with the original rise of the movement” (Burn 10). Jonathan Franzen, for example, admits to the influence of such writers, stating that he began writing novels to create a “conversation with the ... great sixties and seventies Postmoderns” (Franzen and Antrim 73). But a change of thinking in who and what fiction is for has seen Franzen, and to a greater extent his contemporary David Foster Wallace, express reservations with the untold tenets of literary postmodernism.

Just as there are a multitude of accounts of postmodernism’s (supposed) beginning, there are just as many—if not more—arguments as to when its twilight period was, or whether it even existed at all. Debates among literary scholars and philosophers have not dwindled either. Writing in 1997, Richard Rorty believed that “nobody had the foggiest idea what postmodernism meant” (1997: 13). William T. Vollman’s essay “American Writing Today: A

Diagnosis of the Disease” was published in 1990 and against the “games of stifling breathlessness” associated with postmodernism, such as ironic cynicism and metafiction (Vollman 358). For all its evasiveness as a term, postmodernism remains the best point of demarcation to survey the most significant aspects of American culture for the last seventy or so years. Furthermore, the need to at least explain postmodernism’s connection to contemporary fiction is not to settle arguments of its worth or existence, but to convey a sense of the self-aware and literary-conscious environment the majority of writers, such as David Foster Wallace and George Saunders, were writing and responding to.

## Chapter Two: Trouble in Paradise: Optimism and Neoliberalism

*All is for the best in the best of possible worlds*

Pangloss

*Change your thoughts and you change your world*

Norman Vincent Peale

*It's called the American Dream because you have to be asleep to believe it*

George Carlin

### **Introduction**

Saunders' first collection of stories *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline* (1996) introduces the reader to the most common subject matter in his fiction: The United States of America as a riven, divided, and failing project. Its title story is set in an American Civil War re-enactment amusement park, although Saunders' satiric vision and humour incontrovertibly shows the theme park to provide little amusement for the story's central characters, if any at all. Like most of Saunders' characters, they are constantly operating in a space of division and distress and are at some point faced with a moral dilemma. This version of America is the outcome of one of Saunders' most repeated targets, late capitalism; the theme park the perfect place in which to stage American luxury alongside capitalism's grotesque underside. The United States that Saunders portrays exists in a dystopian near-future, one that is rife with the troubles of both America's past *and* present: slavery, warfare, illegal immigration, poverty, and disillusionment. One cannot simply understand Saunders' fictional America to be divided merely by political persuasion, but also by history and future, rich and poor, black and white, and, most notably, the individual and the corporation. Forever on the edge of being further dehumanised by a growing culture that favours greed and prosperity, the powerless individual

is Saunders' most commanding subject to satirise slavery, work, consumption, and class comparisons. "I pour my life's blood into this place and you offer me half what I paid?" asks the father to his estate agent in "Isabelle" (*CivilWarLand* 28). "Market forces at work," replies the estate agent—a suffocating remark amidst financial struggle (28). This frustration with a system that appears to be crushing the individual human spirit occurs again and again in Saunders' fiction. "Market forces at work" best describes the corporate rhetoric of late capitalism that debilitates the individual and leaves very little room for hope in an alternative.

For a country deemed the "land of the free" and "home of the brave," Saunders' characters are not exceptional. Instead they are often made to endure the hardships of a nation that promises freedom and leisure but only offers boredom and bureaucracy in return. As one of his characters laments: "Do you know what we do? In our country? We work" (*Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil* 10). Saunders' America is viewed almost entirely through the lens of the postmodern working class where neoliberalism has all but destroyed the individual, leaving moral questions and subjectivity to waste. Yet, in spite of all adversity, Saunders' characters often become agents of American optimism and self-improvement—satiric vessels for America's obsession with positive thinking. Saunders' criticisms have their roots not in newfound, modern frustrations, but, unlike postmodern fiction, in an awareness and understanding of history. Saunders is quite evidently conscious of class and, as such, there are rarely middle-class characters in Saunders' fiction: there is simply the wealthy and the working-poor. There are the low-wage amusement park operators, the male stripper in "Sea Oak," the caveman in "Pastoralia," and the man who pays his way by giving "drive-thru hand jobs" in "Bounty." Saunders' tendency to write about work is rather simple: "[I]t's the most dominant thing in American life," Saunders says, "It's almost all people do, and we do so much of it, too much of it maybe, and most always for someone else's improvement than our own" (Saunders and Derby 87).

If there is no escaping it in reality, then there is no escape in Saunders' stories. His own working experience is where he admits to finding most of his material, "in the everyday struggle between capitalism and grace" (Solomon n.p.). In this context, this chapter will explore the settings which Saunders constructs to represent the American workplace, and the ways in which satire is at work in these settings. I will examine the characters' relation to work and the ways in which the American dream they pursue is often at odds with their emotional and physical wellbeing. Both their mental health and body have been turned into commodities by late capitalism. In short, Saunders' stories do not possess the scent of a bountiful America rich and free, brave and bold. Rather, there is a hint not merely that an amusement park is in decline, but that something with wider America is inherently wrong. Like Juvenal correcting the urban evils of Rome through verse, the stories in these collections point to real-world referents, particularly the dehumanising of the individual through corporate language and commercialisation. For Saunders, there is trouble in paradise.

### **Insecurity and Anxiety in "Sea Oak"**

"Sea Oak" is a story of a working-class family, involving the death of a lonesome woman who later comes back to life in order to criticise the economic system that prohibited her from living a fulfilling life. The target of this satire is not individual human failing, but the failing of those people in power to acknowledge the illusory nature of the American Dream under free-market capitalism. Consequently, the task of writing about the contextual elements surrounding the makeup of Saunders' stories requires at least a brief mention of the economy. Since the 'stagflation' of the 1970s, the U.S. economy has been in decline, resulting in an increasingly large wealth gap and leaving many with full-time jobs, such as those in Saunders' stories, living below the poverty line. As mentioned, Saunders pays close attention to class

and the effects that low paid and degrading work have on the human experience and the ability to live gracefully in the world. David Rando states: “Among other forms of marginalization, Saunders’s subject is above all the American working class” (437).

The economic and social context surrounding Saunders’ most common subject is thus imperative in understanding his satire. In *The Contemporary Novel in Context* (2011), Andrew Dix, Brian Jarvis, and Paul Jenner conclude that: “The rise and dramatic fall of the US economy from 1980 to the present is an inescapable influence on, and topic for, contemporary American fiction” (Dix et. al 13). In their assessment of contemporary literature, Dix, Jarvis, and Jenner seek to:

[U]nderline the salience of the American economy when thinking about the contemporary American novel. For while it is true that economics figures among the specialist knowledge of relatively few current novelists, the expansion, contraction, transformation and distribution of money in the United States between 1980 and 2010 constitute, nevertheless, the chief structuring upon the national life explored by their fiction. (Dix et al. 4-5)

Suggesting the prevailing rhetoric in politics was concerned with almost nothing else near the end of the millennium, Dix et al. cite Bill Clinton’s 1992 campaign theme: “The economy, stupid” (5). However, it is not just about the economy. This focus creates a kind of subjectivity that is determined by neoliberal discourse and assumptions. For Saunders, who was writing during this time, the effects of the economy are not merely an inescapable influence in his work but are the very thing his characters cannot escape from.

Thus, the U.S economy has been, and continues to be, an increasing authority in fiction during and after postmodernism, and serves as the critical context with which to analyse the individual’s relation to society. The fictional works that Dix, Jarvis, and Jenner include in their survey of contemporary American fiction highlight the importance of

understanding the U.S. economy as a critical context, focused on the role of consumption. After tracing the involvement of the contexts surrounding postmodern works such as *White Noise* (1985), *Fight Club* (1996), and *American Psycho* (1991), they observe that: “Often obsessed with consumerism, contemporary American fiction pays little attention to the largely invisible infrastructure of production,” and they go on to ask: “Why are there so few novels about the world of work?” (135). They provide no definite answer, although Liam Connell’s recent book, *Precarious Labour and the Contemporary Novel* (2018) affirms the lack of attention paid to the nature of work and/or workers: “[I]f there is a newfound wealth of economic and political literary-criticism, the question of work has been relatively under-examined” (1). Through a selection of novels by David Foster Wallace and Aravind Adiga, among others, Connell argues that the contemporary novel does make visible the insecure and precarious nature of work in the current era through the presentation of fictional characters. The replacement of Keynesian economics with neoliberalism in the 1980s, Connell stipulates, has consequently enabled an era of “flexible labour” which has, in part, “been possible by workers absorbing and acquiescing to comparatively high levels of uncertainty” (3). Talk of a ‘living wage’ and a ‘zero-hour contracts’ have featured in news outlets in the years since, and employment has thus come to possess a worrying amount of contingency, instability, and risk. Indeed, Connell’s choice to conduct his study under the title of “precarious labour” mimics the nature of neoliberalism itself, which most scholars define and refer to through terms of “insecurity” and “uncertainty” (Gusterton and Besteman). The most harrowing aspect of this change in the economy is that, in America, work—specifically the idea of working hard—is unequivocally affixed to the promise of success, prosperity, and happiness.

Saunders examines the uncertain prospects for workers under neoliberalism repeatedly. Since the term *neoliberalism* is consistently used in varying ways, I do not seek to define it as, to borrow Matthew Eagleton-Pierce’s explanation, there is “no way of neatly



encapsulating what has now become a kind of catch-all expression” (xiii). Instead, I shall briefly explain ideas surrounding its use and the system of practice it seeks to describe. David Harvey, in his influential work *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2005), succinctly explains that:

Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.  
(Harvey 2)

Harvey argues that these political economic practices are an agenda that emerged after the perceived failures of Keynesianism, when many powerful elites in the 1970s and 1980s became threatened by various post-war social movements. Influenced by classical ideas of economic liberalism, world leaders in the twentieth century—such as Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher—embraced policy shifts away from government spending, toward complete trust in the free-market through privatisation and austerity. Social theorist Pierre Bourdieu is more scathing, defining neoliberalism as “[a] programme for destroying collective structures which may impede the pure market logic” (Bourdieu n.p.). In the introduction to Noam Chomsky’s *Profit Over People: Neoliberalism and Global Order*, Robert McChesney observes that in the United States “neoliberal initiatives are characterized as free market policies that encourage private enterprise and consumer choice, reward personal responsibility and entrepreneurial initiative” (McChesney 7). Similarly, Jennifer Silva lists the characteristics of neoliberalism as: “self-reliance, rugged individualism, untrammelled self-interest, and privatization, equating lack of state interference and labor market efficiency with human freedom” (Silva 14).

Neoliberalism and its characteristics have an equivocal relationship with literary criticism. According to Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith, to use the critical context of neoliberalism as a platform with which to view the landscape of Saunders’ fiction

may, in fact, be a rather bootless errand: “Depending on your critical viewpoint, the expansiveness of the term makes it either absolutely vital or totally useless for critical work on contemporary culture” (Huehls and Smith 1). The overuse of the term and subsequent varying definitions have, they argue, placed neoliberalism as a “Sasquatch-like quality” that becomes difficult to prove and, noting Clive Barnett’s opinion, that it is additionally a “consolation” for left-leaning academics which reduces sociological complexity to economic structure (Huehls and Smith 1; Barnett 10). A disputed term, then, it is no wonder that at the 2014 American Studies Association meeting, Huehls and Smith recall that neoliberalism was labelled as one of several critical terms that might be “so overused as to be evacuated of any specificity” (qtd. in Huehls and Smith 2). By way of rationalising the varying definitions of the term, Huehls and Smith in their volume *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture* (2017) propose that the progression of neoliberalism has advanced through four different phases: “the economic, the political-ideological, and sociocultural, and the ontological” (3). Although earlier postmodern texts in the 1970s referred to economic policies, it is only since the 1990s and 2000s where representations of neoliberalism’s effects are displayed through sociocultural and ontological realities. Whereas novelists such as David Foster Wallace and Jonathan Franzen sought to respond to a culture rampant with profit-margins and consumerism, Saunders, I argue, is most suitable to succeed these earlier neoliberal representations with a focus on Huehls and Smith’s fourth phase, the ontological: “No longer just a set of ideological beliefs, neoliberalism becomes what we are, a mode of existence defined by individual responsibility, entrepreneurial action, and the maximisation of human capital” (9). This margin of difference is small, but the demarcation from consumption and ideology to neoliberalism’s omnipresence and re-defining of subjectivity, does, in the pursuit of classification, permit a path of succession *and* difference, placing Saunders’ satirical stories as something beyond the postmodernism of the 1980s. With regard to his satire, moreover, Saunders’ common

targets—neoliberalism and class ontologies—are required to be normative in his stories, and although they are critiqued through his satire, the ontological realities are not undermined like they are in degenerative satire.<sup>5</sup> Thus, my focus is concerned with those most affected by neoliberal politics, which, by no coincidence, are exactly those who people Saunders' stories: the working class.

“George Saunders peoples his stories with the losers of American history,” writes David Rando (437). Likewise, in her review of *Tenth of December*, Laura Miller imagines George Saunders to be the “bard of the wage slaves” (Miller, 2013: n.p.). Indeed, Saunders gives a voice to those not achieving the American Dream promised to them, regardless of their ability to work hard. This is satire, whereby “satire requires the inclusion, not the exclusion, of human failing” (Quintero 2). Rando considers the story “Sea Oak” to “represent the realities of class in an era when the concept has lost its objective determination and has become one coordinate in a differential field of experience and identity that includes race, gender, sexuality, and culture” (437). It is the individual that Saunders works so well to depict in their struggle against dehumanising corporatism. In “Sea Oak,” the fear of poverty is a treadmill that requires endless work in the face of growing impossibility. Saunders, whose own work history consists of working in oil rigs in South East Asia and as a ‘knuckle-puller’ in a slaughterhouse, attempts to depict the brutalising nature of work. It is these experiences, Saunders says, “[that] contributed to my understanding of capitalism as a benign-looking thing that, as Terry Eagleton says, ‘plunders the sensuality of the body’” (Saunders, “Chicago Christmas” n.p.).

---

<sup>5</sup> “Sea Oak” points toward this pervasive, ontological neoliberalism, which is dramatised using the supernatural. Likewise, the uncertain humanity of the girls who act as garden ornaments in “The Semplica Girl Diaries” (*Tenth of December*) exhibits Saunders’ satirical depiction of an ontological experience of neoliberalism.

The narrator of “Sea Oak,” Thomas, is a male stripper who waits (“Pilots”) tables at a restaurant that appears to be a gender reversal of the American chain Hooters (*Pastoralia* 92). One of the many absurd elements in this story is that the narrator does this job whilst wearing an oversized “Penile Simulator.” This work is described as “stressful” because, “[t]he minute your Cute Rating drops you’re a goner. Guests rank us as Knockout, HoneyPie, Adequate, or Stinker” (92). Thomas, self-described as “a solid HoneyPie/Adequate” does not complain, reasoning: “At least I’m working” (92). Accustomed to daily showing strangers his “penile simulator,” Thomas is no less worried about his objectification than he is grateful for being employed.

Residing in an apartment complex named Sea Oak, Thomas lives with his sister, Min, and her baby Troy; Jade, his cousin, and her baby Mac; and Aunt Bernie, who is the story’s focal character, though not by way of point of view. While the narrator’s other relatives serve to depict a working-class home, with an underprivileged, uneducated family all living together to make ends meet, Aunt Bernie’s character progression becomes the voice of a sociological critique of class, opportunity, and positive thinking. Initially, Aunt Bernie is described as a “peacemaker” supported with examples of her gratification in the face of adversity and the tribulations that come with being poor: “When I say Sea Oak’s a pit she says she’s just glad to have a roof over her head” (95). Aunt Bernie’s disposition is to “be thankful” despite there being an “ad hoc crack house in the laundry room” and “brass knuckles in the kiddie pool” (97). This eternal optimism is satirically translated in the very fabric of the dialogue. Rando notes that by way of structuring his characters within various forms of difficulties, “Saunders subtly positions his reader as a consumer of working-class satire” (Rando 449). This is evident in a conversation between Aunt Bernie and Jade:

“What a nice day we’ve had,” Aunt Bernie says once we’ve got the babies in bed.

“Man, what an optometrist,” says Jade.” (*PS* 95)

Here, Jade’s response shows how giving authentic voices to those with limited language skills is a deliberate choice by Saunders. By mistaking ‘optimist’ for ‘optometrist,’ Jade’s error allows the reader to be immersed into not only the setting the protagonist exists in, but also the limited vocabulary the story’s characters possess. Linguistic freedom is not granted to Jade, and thus like Jade, the reader is also cast into the struggle of understanding a world where some voices are powerless. Moreover, the fact that only Bernie possesses a positive outlook toward life makes this small reply a pun. Indeed, by “positioning the limited, imperfect voice as the central structuring force in his narratives, then, Saunders is able to explore the political and social contexts within which the ‘losers’ of his lens suffer and grow” (Hayes-Brady 37).

The growth of the story’s characters is really only evident in Bernie which, to begin with, is the main tension in the first part of the story, as Aunt Bernie’s optimism conflicts with the working-class frustrations of her relatives: “ ‘You know what I do if something bad happens?’ Bernie says. ‘I don’t think about it. Don’t take it so serious. It ain’t the end of the world. That’s what I do. That’s how I got where I am.’ ” (*PS* 98). Saunders’ omission and phrasing of sentences is skilful, deliberately producing grammatical errors in the working-class speech. Frequent omission of adverbs and prepositions point to a language that is underdeveloped.

The narrator loves Bernie, but sees fault with her thinking, noting that she is sixty, owns nothing, was a slave to her father, and never had a date in her life (98). Min sarcastically replies, “ ‘Oh, we’re doing great,’ ” whilst pulling “Troy out from behind the couch” and brushing duck shards off his sleeper (98). Later, after dying of fright during a home invasion, Aunt Bernie’s death becomes the rising action whereby aspects of the family’s poverty are further brought into the foreground upon only being able to afford a cardboard box for her

coffin (103). However, in a climactic and surreal turn of events, Aunt Bernie is brought back to life, now occupying a zombie-like-undead existence within the same world. Bernie's body is the same ("same perm, same glasses, same blue dress we buried her in") but Bernie, the eternal optimist, is now aggressive and rude—the antithesis to her previous personality and attitude (112). As a speaking corpse, her language becomes vulgar, obscene; her sentences shorter and her disposition now outwardly practical, verging on cynical: " 'Sit the fuck down,' she says ... 'You, mister,' she says to me, 'are going to start showing your cock' " (112). Measuring pathos with surreal, dry humour, Saunders' marred resurrection of Bernie perhaps exposes the failures of eternal optimism; although by no means does it favour the opposite. Bernie realises she has been hardworking all her life, but she never reaps what she sows. Hers is a Sisyphean situation: no merit in work ethic and doomed to fail regardless of her past optimism. One may argue that Aunt Bernie is a representation of the American people, those in the individual pursuit of prosperity and happiness, but ignorant of the circumstances hindering their ability to succeed. It is a saddening account of a working-class family, but it is one that is also aware of its inability to accurately portray such tribulations in the realist mode.

Aunt Bernie's character invites analysis of Saunders as a satirist, and his response to neoliberalism. Firstly, it is important to note Aunt Bernie's return to a state of being after death. Bernie's profane language and frustration at a system (neoliberalism) that has left her to die poor, a virgin, with no travel experience, and no inheritance for her children, literally tear her apart. The resurrection is not so much a portrayal of the undead as it is a psychological awakening of the American experience for the postmodern working class—a reaction to 'ontological neoliberalism'. Indeed, Michael Trussler states:

Rather than instigating an apocalyptic social breakdown (as traditional zombies do), Saunders's "undead" have little, if any, durable agency, and are ignored by the society that created them. They are disavowed by mainstream American

culture: if their wretchedness was to be taken seriously, this act would repudiate the pervasive American ideology of “positive thinking,” an ethos that is fully endorsed by neoliberal corporations because it severely circumscribes the possibility of existential experience and political emancipation. (Trussler 206)

Saunders’ undead characters thus operate in a space of critiquing the society with a voice they are not permitted to have when alive. Thus, it is only after death that Aunt Bernie understands the hypocrisies of her family’s Sisyphean struggle: “Never married, no kids, work work work” (*PS* 102). You work until you die, and then you work some more; there is very little, if any, virtue in suffering. Both dead and frustrated at her inability to live gracefully in the world, Aunt Bernie expresses this physically, even ripping the microwave door off. Moreover, Aunt Bernie’s newfound impoliteness is matched with a practical wisdom previously unpossessed—gone is her positive thinking, replaced with a hardened, practical approach to survival.

This approach is sustained and satirically repeated through the remainder of “Sea Oak”. After Bernie’s funeral, Freddie, the narrator’s mother’s boyfriend, interprets Aunt Bernie’s death as a “wake-up call” to “pull yourselves up by the bootstraps” (105). Undead and angry, Bernie seems to have returned to preach such calls. Yet, her undead status is different to that of zombies in popular culture, as Trussler explains:

The disreputable “undead” in Saunders’s stories ... differ from Hollywood’s zombies in that their genesis derives specifically from the socioeconomic conditions that formed the basis of their lives, whereas zombies in popular culture often have a mysterious and vaguely defined origin (such as radiation). (Trussler 206)

Saunders’ characters in “Sea Oak” do not exist as bodies separate from their socioeconomic status. Rather, their subjectivity is entirely regulated by such status. Rando writes that the story, “provocatively suspends the techniques of realism and postmodernism in the tense differential relation [which] creates productive incongruities that allow Saunders’s fiction to undermine

class ontologies” (Rando 438). Indeed, as Huehls and Smith state: “No longer just a set of ideological beliefs, neoliberalism becomes what we are” (Heuhls and Smith 7). Saunders, by the very nature of his satire, undermines states of being as insufficient to describe the human experience. Bernie is resurrected by her own repressed anger at the conditions that significantly impaired her quality of life, that once had her once believe that working hard would lead to prosperity. “All her life she worked hard. She never hurt anybody. And now this,” laments her family. (100) Amidst all absurdity, it is Bernie’s sincere question that echoes after reading: “Why do some people get everything and I got nothing?” ... “Why? Why was that?” (123). Yet immediately after the question she says, “Show your cock,” and then dies again (123). No amount of positive thinking or hard work would ever emancipate Bernie. As George Saunders has remarked: “American society is uncomfortable with the idea that some people’s lives are difficult past the point of sanity and that they aren’t necessarily to blame” (Wylie 63-4).

### **American Optimism**

While most of Saunders’ stories critique the importance of individual will in neoliberal landscapes, Saunders’ more sustained critique of Aunt Bernie’s situation is directed at America’s fascination with optimism and positive thinking, often satirising where the two destructively intersect. After the death of Aunt Bernie, Freddie lays out the facts “about this country” to his family, stating:

Anybody can do anything. But first they gotta try ... It’s the freaking American way—you start out in a dangerous craphole and work hard so you can someday move up to a somewhat less dangerous craphole. And finally maybe you get a mansion. But at this rate you ain’t even gonna make it to the somewhat less dangerous craphole. (*PS* 106)



Freddie's ideology is that success is determined by one's will, not circumstance. Here, the problem is not circumstance, but a lack of will. The idea that "Anybody can do anything" is sustained throughout Saunders' fiction in a multitude of ways. Saunders' critique of the American present is satirically presented in an unusual, anachronistic future wherein his characters suffer the consequences of an historical past. In this way, Saunders illustrates the creation, manipulation, and sale of nostalgia that is rooted in American history. Thus, with regard to portrayal and satirical distortion of real world referents, it is fitting that aspects of American history be examined to understand the roots that Saunders' satire explicitly targets. In doing so, I seek to establish a foundation with which to assess Saunders' stories within the context of a group of key terms. Firstly, I deem it appropriate to revisit the construction of the United States and the ideology and ethos that many scholars believe to have contributed to its dominating beliefs and principles. In Alexis de Tocqueville's famous work *Democracy in America*—believed to be originally published between 1835 and 1840—he notes that "the position of the Americans" is "quite exceptional" (Tocqueville 440). Since then, and specifically in the mid-twentieth century, many scholars began, and continue to, refer to a concept known as *American exceptionalism*. Indeed, the rhetoric of American exceptionalism is still active in the postmodern era, writes Wilber Caldwell, noting that: "The bounded homeland and the bold distinctions between 'us' and 'them' remain very real" (Caldwell 159). Writing about the success of the American Revolution and the construction of its democratic republic during his visit to the country, "Tocqueville," writes Seymour Martin Lipset, "is the first to refer to the United States as exceptional—that is, qualitatively different from all other countries" (Lipset 18). With respect to America's exceptionalism regarded as a matter of *difference*, then, its national character defined through its work ethic and thinking positively are most definitely factors that set it apart from other countries.

By Tocqueville's day, Europeans already perceived America as a land of endless opportunity. The Dutch historian Henri Baudet wrote that it became a place, "onto which all identification and interpretation, all dissatisfaction and desire, all nostalgia and idealism seeking expression could be projected" (Baudet 55). Contrary to many of the more common arguments that place the escape of religious persecution at the centre of migration to America, there is evidence that the marketing of the country depicted it not solely as an escape, but as a place where all desires could be fulfilled, however ambitious they may be. Rather than merely serve as a place to evade persecution, America was also envisioned as Eden—an exceptional country without the shackles of history. Jack Greene notes that not long after its discovery, "America became the locus for a variety of utopian constructions" (Greene, 1993: 30). Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* (1515-16) is a classic example of such envisions. A political satire that takes aim at the ailments of sixteenth-century England, More's *Utopia* positions the New World as the place to evade the maladies of European polities. Robert Elliott declares in his book *The Shape of Utopia*, that "it is in Thomas More's *Utopia* itself that the two modes of satire and utopia are most clearly seen to be indivisible" (Elliott 22). Elliott, a scholar of satire with his seminal work *The Power of Satire: Magic, Ritual, Art* (1966), correlates the intent of the satiric mode to bring about positive change (at least with respect to the satirist's opinion) with that of an imagined place considered desirable. Although More's *Utopia* is both influential and relevant to discussions on satire, there is not the space to elaborate on it specifically. However, with regard to Saunders, it is interesting to consider that, to some degree, More serves as a traditional bookend to Saunders. Whereas More's *Utopia* scrutinises Europe in favour of the New World's possibilities, Saunders' satire points to the New World as failing, in "Bad Decline", and registers these disappointments through his characters' voices: "I'm sorry, but I feel that life should offer more than this" (*CivilWarLand* 48). The immense potential of the New World, so entrenched into the consciousness of Europeans, is not perceived as a utopia

by Saunders. Whilst More proposed America as a solution, Saunders perceives it, five hundred years later, as the problem.

America was envisioned by those in Europe as a place for the bold, brave, and enterprising. Many of these visions were framed with the ideal of economic prosperity, a utopia of wealth. Interestingly, Greene proposes that: “European invaders slowly identified it as a place that provided exceptional opportunities for the mass conversion of souls to Christianity or, more commonly, for the acquisition of individual wealth and fame.” (Greene, 1993: 30). It is important to note here that the mass migration of people from Europe to the New World was not so much a result of the discontent and oppression at home, or a fundamental desire to spread English power, nor even wholly founded in ideas of liberty. Rather, it was a desire for achieving fortune and the acquisition of land, an aspiration that was deeply entrenched due to the promises of riches that many of promoters of the New World described (Greene, 1998: 193). G. R. Elton relates this desire with the emotions of “greed and the search for greater wealth” (114). Furthermore, Perry Miller, in his text *Errand in the Wilderness* (1952), notes that most immigrants “came for better advantage and for less danger, and to give prosperity the opportunity of success” (4). Brewing in the colonial imagination was more than an escape from the British Empire—it was the *chance* to have a dream actualised through a sense of place. Additionally, it was also the optimistic belief in such a chance being fulfilled.

The United States’ embrace of commercialisation and consumer capitalism is not solely due to a post-Second World War booming economy. Rather, the communities that founded the nation were transformed into an empire of freedom guided by the mark of economy, wealth, and prosperity. It is in this context where Saunders’ critiques of human tendency are plainly exposed through his satire. In New England, many people became more

invested in their individual pursuits of happiness—pursuits that were fundamentally rooted in materialism and consumption. This created, Greene argues, a longing in some to turn back toward their diminishing religious roots which consisted of a more “pious and coherent social order” (Greene, 1993: 203). The religious appeal for New Englanders has been said to have intensified “special themes of New England providential thought” with a yearning to have such heaven-sent thinking spread across America (203).

This picture of American culture is not complete without acknowledging its history as a nation of people whose beliefs in their future selves were governed by a sense that they had been *chosen*. Many in New England held firm to the belief that their successful migration—although many others lost their lives en route—was nothing less than providential and, as a result, they sought to expand their spiritual awakening to the other colonies. “[T]he myth of America”, writes Sacvan Bercovitch, is central to the idea that, “[i]n the beginning was the world and the word was with the New England Way, and the word became ‘America’” (Bercovitch 5-6). The New Englanders were guided by this sense of individual betterment, but this was not the case for all European colonies. New Spain, New Amsterdam, and New France constructed their societies in the image of home in Europe, whereas the Puritans in New England sought prosperity, a tenet that would later have a large influence on the American self.

The New England Way, comprised of individual betterment and a sense of providence, is also intrinsically connected to the rise of Puritanism, which began to emerge in England in the late sixteenth century. Puritans followed the ideas of the theologian John Calvin, who taught that the world is divided between the appointed and the damned. Whether one was of the appointed elect and offered salvation by God was unknowable, even though it was understood that God had already made his decision. Eric Foner writes that although

“nothing one did on earth ... would make any difference,” leading a good life and “prospering economically” might well be indications of God’s grace (Foner 65). Unlike other colonies, the Puritans who settled in New England saw themselves as on the elected side of God’s decision, based on the assumption that Catholicism in Britain was not the true faith and so God had sent them into the New World—their growing community confirmed the belief that they were instruments of “sacred historical design” (Greene, 1988: 21). This sense of religious exceptionalism, coupled with the way the New World was publicised to Europeans, is not without direct connection to Puritanism’s wider effects on the American ethos. Indeed, American exceptionalism, religion, and capitalism, are all imperative in understanding the contemporary America that Saunders mocks and criticises in his satiric fiction.

Furthermore, most settlers in New England were Calvinist, a branch of reformed Protestantism. Calvinism in the North American colonies was important in constructing modern cultural identity. Burdened and constantly pre-occupied with the thought of death and sin, many of those in New England—and Protestants in other colonies for that matter—developed illnesses that, despite later being scientifically explainable, were at the time regarded as treatable through positive thinking. In his work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1920), Max Weber notes that Calvinist theology, which had a great influence on the American Way, spread values that encouraged capitalist tendencies: “[T]he spirit of capitalism ... was present before the capitalist order” (Weber 55). Indeed, as if harking back to Greene’s assertion that early migrants were in pursuit of “individual wealth and fame” (Greene, 1993: 30), Weber most succinctly redefines this desire not as an opportunity but as a responsibility:

The tonic that braced them for the conflict was a new conception of religion, which taught them to regard the pursuit of wealth as, not merely an advantage, but as a duty. Capitalism was the social counterpart of Calvinist theology. (Tawney 2)

As a result, New England—mainly consisting of Puritan families—initially prospered, championed by the requirement of hard work in the pursuit of wealth; and, by extension, happiness. It is evident that Americans’ optimism toward individual betterment is deeply rooted in the New England consciousness, which, entwined with religion and capitalism, spread throughout the United States, and arguably still does. However, the Calvinists, so very occupied with the dangers of sin and the fear that their current situation was a sign they were of the damned, developed many illnesses. The solution, however, bears an almost symmetrical relation to their solution for financial and religious hardship: thinking positively and working hard. Consumer capitalism, the setting which stages the majority of Saunders’ stories, is hospitable to this desire for growth, for betterment, and for the ever-increasing determination to achieve perfection—a pursuit which is more complicated when entwined with the project of late capitalism. For those who were not prospering—or not to their own Puritan ambitions—then this was not a result of circumstance but a failure to think positively enough to overcome the obstacle.

### **“Ask the Optimist!”**

Saunders’ satire embodies the work ethic of Calvinism in combination with America’s optimistic tendencies that inform much of the country’s motivational and self-help literature. Saunders’ criticism of this American tendency to think positively and help oneself, can be traced back to the nineteenth-century where one Mary Patterson, believed to have never been free from illness, sought help from the spiritual healer Phineas Quimby. No more than a week after seeing Quimby, Patterson felt cured from her ailments—a rapid and responsive recovery to afflictions that had previously never been healed. Quimby’s method, based on ‘mental healing,’ was a practice which had begun in Europe one hundred years earlier through a belief

in the importance of magnetic fluids and mesmerism. Marquis de Puysegur (1751–1825), one of the founders of hypnotism, was a French magnetiser whose work in mesmerism was influenced by the Viennese physician Franz Anton Mesmer. Puysegur explains mesmerism thusly:

The entire doctrine of Animal Magnetism is contained in the two words: *Believe* and *want*. I believe that I have the power to set into action the vital principle of my fellow-men; I *want* to make use of it; this is all my science and all my means.  
(Ellenberger 72)

This doctrine of mesmerism was later pioneered in New England and throughout America by Charles Poyen de Saint Saveur. Upon reaching the shores of America, this form of spiritual healing became immediately popular in the minds of a group of people who had already cultivated their selves as *exceptional* and instilled with providence—a naturally optimistic disposition. The transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote on January 13, 1837, that he “went to see the magnetic sleep & saw the wonder” (qtd. in Janik 55). By 1843, more than two hundred magnetisers sold their services in Boston alone, whilst would-be mesmerisers were tempted with dozens of books with do-it-yourself instructions which promised self-improvement—a clear beginning of America’s fascination with self-help (55).

For Quimby, sickness was due to an erroneous belief and required nothing more than mind over matter. “Disease is something made by belief or forced upon us by public opinion,” Quimby wrote (164). Mary Baker Eddy, formerly Mary Patterson, would later found Christian Science, and Quimby’s teachings would later lead to the movement of New Thought. The progression from Calvinism to New Thought can be seen as a result of the teachings imbued by Quimby. John Haller and Robert Fuller explain in *The History of New Thought* that such thinking is central to America’s proclivity for optimism and the pursuit of happiness:

In a broad range of publications that included motivational literature, philosophical and religious texts, and even occasional novels, nineteenth-century New Thought writers exposed the speculative aspects of their world with a temperament of curiosity mixed with optimism. Like Emerson and Swedenborg, they had only contempt for those who dwelled on tragedy or fatalism. Arguably the most philosophical movement in American culture, New Thought represented a form of applied idealism that resonated across the religious and secular landscape, offering a purposive life filled with optimism, practicality, healthy-mindedness, and economic well-being. (6)

In many aspects influenced by the movement of transcendentalism, New Thought favoured the subjective human experience over empirical objectivism. As a consequence, certain ways of thinking were favoured whilst others were seen as inherently wrong. Positive thinking not only affixed itself to America's inherently optimistic outlook, but simultaneously sought to reject any pessimistic references. It is with regard to this strand of thinking that one can most confidently state that the New Thought movement, in combination with the optimism of America's founding colonists, have contributed greatly to one of the most conspicuous set of ideas in American culture today; and, more specifically, fed in postmodern writing—the generation within that which Saunders represents.

By this reasoning, if one's current situation or future prospects are looking bleak, it is not because they genuinely are, but because one is not thinking positively enough about them. In American culture, the self-help credo of positive thinking is ubiquitous. Just as a paracetamol may be the first solution for a headache, positive thinking is America's solution for *everything*, which, as a result, includes headaches. In the context of neoliberalism, Saunders targets this often self-destructive way of thinking. In "Ask the Optimist!", a story that originally featured in *The New Yorker* and was later published in *The Braindead Megaphone*, Saunders adopts the form of a typical self-help column where readers write in to ask for advice. In this case, the person offering counsel is an optimist. Like many of Saunders' short and



highly-satirical pieces, the story places emphasis not on plot so much as on the language of an idea or system. The satiric approach of “Ask the Optimist!” is merely the surface of Saunders’ distinctive satire, and although it pointedly takes aim at this mode of thinking, the make-up of Saunders’ more complex satires target optimism within the framework of a neoliberal landscape. The story initially begins with individual letters with Saunders’ humour satirising the mundane:

Dear Optimist:

My husband, who knows very well that I love nothing more than wearing bonnets, recently bought a convertible. He’s always doing “passive-aggressive” things like this. Like once, after I had all my teeth pulled, he bought a big box of Cracker Jack. Another time, when I had very serious burns over 90 percent of my body, he tricked me into getting a hot oil massage, then tripped me so that I fell into a vat of hydrochloric acid. I’ve long since forgiven him for these “misunderstandings,” but tell me, is there a way I can be “optimistic” about this “bonnet” situation? (103)

The humour here is surreal and witty as it describes what is a rather unusual situation. Although the writer is seeking an optimistic outlook, she is doing so in the face of situations that, despite her saying so, are most certainly not “passive-aggressive.” Additionally, the advice she seeks is not for the grotesque hydrochloric acid situation, but her disappearing bonnets. The response from the “Optimist” is equally irrational and serves to fulfil the writer’s request in nullifying the issue through positive thinking: “What I recommend? Buy a large number of bonnets, place them in the car, begin driving! When one blows off, put on another from your enormous stockpile!” (104). In facing the prospect of losing her bonnets, the response is to have more—not so much a solution as a digression of thought; and, perhaps, a way of refusing to address the situation. The optimist is Saunders’ satirical voice, offering hyperbolic advice that becomes increasingly ridiculous.

These short columns continue with regular letters from “Small-Penis”, a man seeking advice after his wife has left him for another man. Initially, Small-Penis admits to “feeling somewhat ‘pessimistic’” but, in repeated replies with the “Optimist”, it appears that Small-Penis has reasons for his optimism, noting that his ex-wife’s new man “speaks five languages [including] Sanskrit” (107). The response from the Optimist is one of frustration:

You know, Small-Penis, you don’t seem to understand Optimism at all! What is the essential quality of the Optimist? He is non-Pessimistic! What is the essential quality of the Pessimist? They think too much ... If something is bothering me, I think of something else! If someone tells me some bad news? I ignore it! Like, I knew this one guy, very Optimistic, who was being eaten by a shark and did not even scream, but kept shouting, “It’s all for the best!” (107-108)

Like Quimby and Emerson, the “Optimist” has contempt for Small-Penis’s perception that, although not essentially pessimistic, is most certainly not wholly optimistic. Worth consideration is Saunders’ distinctive capitalisation of both ‘optimism’ and ‘pessimism’. No longer merely nouns and adjectives, they have instead become proper nouns, serviceable as unique entities and branded states of being. Every personal problem in the story is wildly different, swerving from the absurd, to the mundane, and the downright tragic. However, this serves Saunders’ purpose to assert that optimism will not solve every problem. Even as the “Optimist” receives a letter from Satan written from Hell, the optimist ignores all evil in order to alleviate Satan’s loneliness (112). “Ask the Optimist!” most succinctly speaks directly to an American culture that is not only contemporary; instead it addresses an optimistic mode of thinking that is evident from the very beginning of the country’s founding through America’s history with values of optimism, providence, and hard work.

### Optimism and Neoliberalism

“Ask the Optimist!” presents Saunders’ frustration with optimism, but this frustration is further refined in stories such as “Pastoralia” and “Exhortation”, which illuminate how destructive such optimism can be in a neoliberal landscape. Saunders pointedly proves that positivity is not happiness. Although the postmodern fascination with irony led many to believe in a world without conviction and meaning, the one American sensibility that remains steadfast is positive thinking. Americans are still viewed as positive thinking and optimistic. The aforementioned roots of American’s optimistic thinking have many Americans believe that regardless of their situation they will, at some point, be prosperous; but such thinking feeds into neoliberal ideology. Neoliberalism’s effect is its application of market logic to personal and social life, viewing human subjectivity through an entirely economic perspective. As Wendy Brown explains:

Neoliberalism normatively constructs and interpellates individuals as entrepreneurial actors in every sphere of life. It figures individuals as rational, calculating creatures whose moral autonomy is measured by their capacity for ‘self-care’ – the ability to provide for their own needs and service their own ambitions. (Brown n.p.)

Not unlike the Protestant settlers in the New World, the neoliberal individual is one whose future self is predominantly viewed in terms of investment and possible outcomes. In this manner, neoliberalism demands people to be like products or capitalist corporations—in pursuit of endless growth. Positive thinking and reliance on self-care contributes to this market logic. Barbara Ehrenreich argues in her book *Bright-sided* (2009) that positive thinking has compromised America, threatening one’s ability to respond adequately to health concerns, employment issues, and even terrorist threats. This may appear a generalised claim correlating positive thinking with a certain type of optimistic delusion (there are certain aspects of such a

correlation that do warrant inspection) but Ehrenreich's central claim is worthy of exploration, especially with regard to the tribulations faced by many of Saunders' characters. In response to the argument that Americans are "positive" whilst not being the happiest people, Ehrenreich states: "positivity is not so much our condition or our mood as it is part of our ideology—the way we explain the world and think we ought to function within it" (Ehrenreich 4). Positive thinking has permeated the corporate and business world, significantly affecting employer-to-employee relations. This, coupled with the effect of neoliberalism and one's ever-burning desire to achieve the American Dream, is the central topic of Saunders' satire and the world in which many Americans find themselves in: idealism fraught with insecurity.

Financial security, for some, is possible. For others, due to any number of other factors and circumstances, it is not. This runs contrary to the American Dream which is idyllic and idealistic though ultimately impractical and a rather simplistic way of viewing the world. Americans are fundamentally optimistic people. But this is problematic when material prosperity is considered the new Eden. In John Oliver and Andy Zaltzman's satirical podcast, *The Bugle*, Oliver had this to say regarding the ever-widening wealth gap in the United States:

There is an interesting psychological relationship that Americans have with money or, more specifically, the lack of it. The problem is: Americans are inherently optimistic people. And that can be a problem. Americans in the top fifth make 16.7 times the income of those in the bottom fifth. And yet, less than half of American think that wealth gap is a problem. The simple psychological explanation, Andy, is that everyone—even the poorest Americans—have the tendency to assume that one day they will be the richest Americans, and they don't want their hypothetical wealth to be taxed in the future. They're protecting income that doesn't even exist yet! ... Americans are suicidally optimistic. Hope is their Kryptonite. (Oliver, n.p.)

Attesting to Tocqueville's observation of America's "charm of anticipated success," Oliver is funny here, but he also quite cogently connects tenets of the American Dream that eventually become self-destructive in a country of neoliberal agendas and an ever-widening wealth gap (Tocqueville 474). People who forever see themselves as future billionaires have little regard for realistically assessing their current situation. Oliver later makes mention of a "great John Steinbeck quote," which states that: "Socialism never took root in America because the poor see themselves not as an exploited proletariat, but as temporarily embarrassed millionaires," which rather succinctly exposes the impossibility of a dream that, for some, can only be imagined (qtd. in Oliver n.p.). This is because if a person does not achieve the American Dream (or fails to believe in it) then they are the problem; their work ethic has failed to keep them on the path of prosperity. Positive thinking drives the American consumer to think that the American Dream is not earned but purchased; freedom isn't a state but a commodity; and that companies, like individuals, will always have room for growth. Ehrenreich writes that: "Perpetual growth, whether of a particular company or an entire company, is of course an absurdity, but positive thinking makes it seem possible, if not ordained" (8). This strand of positive thinking's relentless promotion in consumer culture is ubiquitous and controlling, evidenced in workplace policies and workplace communication.

### **"Pastoralia"**

With this understanding of optimistic thinking in American culture, it is of interest as to how, and why, it appears to subtly determine the mindsets of Saunders' characters. Americans are working now more than they ever have in the last century; and for less, too (Schor 4). In "Pastoralia" the unnamed narrator is forced to stay at work in an amusement park as kind of live-in arrangement with management. There are no explicit details as to when he visits his

family; the only communication the narrator has with those outside of the workplace is correspondence via fax with his wife. The story is a satire of America's fascination with the spectacle, re-enactment of history, and also a satire of the treatment of the human body and mind under neoliberalism and corporate agendas. Abundant in absurdity and exaggeration, the piece is ripe for critique and humour: the conditions the narrator works in; the job required; the method by which he is asked to dispose of his bodily waste. All these show Saunders' satiric vision of dehumanising an individual for comic effect. The narrator is acting as a caveman fighting for his survival through barbaric means. Yet the truth in this satire is that he is, quite literally, fighting for his social and economic survival in a workplace that, although dystopian, bears much resemblance to common practices in America since the 1970s. It is a traditional distorted reality, whereby the "fiction represents reality far better than the nonfiction does" (Pogell 466). Locked in a cave and treated like an animal, the narrator and his colleague, Janet, are made to work to survive but no more—nothing points to the fulfilment of their respective American dreams. The reader is graced with the knowledge that this absurd world told in a realist mode by Saunders is, quite explicitly, funny. But there is no hiding that if such a setting is changed, there would be a striking resemblance to many current workplace practices, particularly those of one of the most popular stores in American, Wal-Mart.

Wal-Mart, writes Ellen Rosen, has come to practise and has essentially perfected a robust control of the contemporary retail workplace which she has called "management by intimidation" (Rosen 63). Managers, she argues, are faced with imperatives to reduce costs, often resulting in understaffing. As a consequence, workers—who are part of what is called the "Wal-Mart Family"—are constantly time-poor and adjust their lives around a manager's wishes. In "Pastoralia", Saunders uses language to show the employer's power over the workers: "Please," the letter says, "only let's remember that we are a *family*, and you are the

*children*, not that we're saying you're immature, only that you do most of the chores while we do all the thinking" (*Pastoralia* 48; emphasis mine). Moreover, poor employment relations results in a lack of experienced workers due to insufficient and subpar training. If a mistake is made by a worker, then it is they who take the blame: "Managers 'delegate out' jobs, and workers 'take the fall.' They can be fired when something goes wrong" (Rosen 36). This abusive management style may trickle down to the most mundane aspects of one's employment. Women in Milwaukee have shared stories of these harsh management practices. One woman, a claims manager who had been working for Wal-Mart (part of the "family"), said: "I ended up getting fired for taking my break fifteen minutes early because I had to use the restroom. And I was pregnant, mind you. They called it time theft because it wasn't my scheduled time to take my break" (Collins 105). This type of micro-management of the employee is described by Saunders in "Downtrodden Mary's Failed Campaign of Terror", wherein the narrator, after having to listen to her manager in his office, says: "When he's done I tell him it was excellent and he reminds me to subtract the time spent listening to him from my time sheet so I don't inadvertently get paid for it." (*CivilWarLand* 80). Here, Mary, like Wal-Mart employees, is reminded that her worth is determined and influenced by time, the controlling clock of capitalism.

Furthermore, it has been reported that Wal-Mart workers have been locked in when working overnight in situations where not one of the employees has a key to exit. *The New York Times* released an article exposing the plight of many who were victims of this practice. Michael Rodriguez, a worker in Corpus Christi, Texas, explains how he was unable to get to a hospital after heavy machinery had crushed his ankle, leaving him in terrible pain and unable to do his job. No other employee possessed a store key, and "[t]he fire exit ... was hardly an option—management had drummed into the overnight workers that if they ever used that exit for anything but a fire, they would lose their jobs" (Greenhouse n.p.). The narrator's

objective in “Pastoralia” is to care for his family and his sick son, yet none of his family members are present in the story as the whole narrative takes place at work. He is, like many working night-shifts at Wal-Mart, ‘locked in’, suffering erasure of personal space. Indeed, Saunders—through his distinctive style of treating regular places and things as commodified proper nouns—highlights this restriction of movement and space, directly: “I go into my Separate Area and put on my footies. I have some cocoa and take out a Daily Partner Performance Evaluation Form” (4). Personal space is granted to the employee like that of a prison cubicle. The threat of losing his job is his greatest anxiety, one that is intrinsically connected to his ability to care for his family. However, there is an argument that his own adherence to America’s ideology of positive thinking is quite possibly the only thing keeping him focused and employed; and, to the same degree, keeping him subjected to corporate cruelty by intimidation.

From the outset, the narrator is not well: “Not that I’m doing so bad. Not that I really have anything to complain about. Not that I would actually verbally complain if I did have something to complain about. No. Because I’m Thinking Positive/Saying Positive” (1). The narrator, however, has clearly been silenced to a certain degree—intimidated into not being able to complain, instead forced to adopt the mentality of positive thinking and a Puritan work ethic. He, along with his co-worker Janet, share a cave in the amusement park wherein their daily task is to live like cave people, and to eat recently killed goats which come through a slot in the cave wall. Interestingly, despite their performance and dedication to the verisimilitude of the diorama, they have no direct, unmediated interaction with management. Instead, fax is the medium of choice for both characters to communicate with people who all exist outside of the cave. The outside world only enters into the cave through the slot or the fax machine. The voice of such corporate speak via fax is most typically a satire of the rhetoric of corporate



manipulation found in many office environments. The following example is a memo from management that appears through the slot with a goat:

Please know that each one of you is very special to us, and are never forgotten about. Please know that if each one of you could be kept, you would be, if that would benefit everyone. But it wouldn't, or we would do it, wouldn't we, we would keep every one of you. But as we meld into our sleeker new organization, what an excellent opportunity to adjust our Staff Mix. And so, although in this time of scarcity and challenge, some must perhaps go, the upside of this is, some must stay, and perhaps it will be you. Let us hope it will be you, each and every one of you, but no, as stated previously, it won't, that is impossible. So just enjoy the treats provided, and don't worry, and wait for your supervisor to contact you, and if he or she doesn't, know with relief that the Staff Remixing has passed by your door. (13-14)

This is the first of a number of memos that interrupt the story. However, amidst the other subplots—the narrator's relationship to Janet; the narrator's sick child at home; Janet's troubled son—it becomes difficult to ascertain just which conversation is being interrupted. The various elements of discourse in the story all used through different parties construct a simultaneously social and commercial 'pull' to the story; a structure that, like the characters' work-life balance, is increasingly entangled. In "Pastoralia," the 'balance' is quite purposefully an imbalance. The 'life' of the narrator *is* work; but Saunders shows that to not complain and think positively is paralysing and thus isolates the individual from others, slowly becoming dehumanised in the working environment.

This paralysis by corporate rhetoric is subtly exaggerated throughout the piece, to the point where management feel confident enough to not provide a goat for the narrator and Janet to consume, instead leaving them with a memo detailing them to pay for the disposal of their own faeces:

Hence this note about a touchy issue that is somewhat grotesque and personal, but we must address it, because one of you raised it, the issue of which was why do we require that you Remote Attractions pay the money which we call, and ask that you call, the Disposal Debit, but which you people insist on wrongly calling the Shit Fee. Well, this is to tell you why, although isn't it obvious to most? We hope. But maybe not. Because what we have found, no offense, is that sometimes you people don't get things that seem pretty obvious to us, such as why you have to pay for your Cokes in your fridge if you drink them. Who should then? Did we drink your Cokes you drank? We doubt it. You did it. Likewise with what you so wrongly call the Shit Fee, because why do you expect us to pay to throw away your poop when after all you made it? Do you think your poop is a legitimate business expense? Does it provide benefit to us when you defecate? No, on the contrary, it would provide benefit if you didn't, because then you would be working more. (46-7)

[...]

So therefore please stop saying to us: I have defecated while on the clock, dispose of it for free, kindly absorb my expense. We find that loopy. Because, as you know, you Remote Locations are far away, and have no pipes, and hence we must pay for the trucks. The trucks that drive your poop. Your poop to the pipes. Why are you so silly? It is as if you expect us to provide those Cokes for free, just because you thirst. (47)

This extract mirrors the earlier example of the pregnant worker at Walmart who was accused of "time theft" for using the restroom when it was her scheduled break time (Collins 105). This language, whereby management explicitly employ depthless rhetorical questions ("Did we drink your Cokes you drank?") coupled with an artificial sense of their 'helping' their employees, constructs a language predicated on influence and the power of persuasion. Alex Millen notes that Saunders' "calculated manipulation of questions ... is a rhetorical stroke [and] is an example of how language is used to construct consent by massaging affirmation" (Millen 9). And it conducts such manipulation with assistance from the form—the memo—as a text within a text: a medium in which Saunders can playfully manipulate corporate speak

with satiric distortion. Sarah Pogell notes that the memo's "robotic prose" makes it "the perfect medium for saying outrageous and inhumane things with a semblance of reasonability" (467). Moreover, Pogell notes a difference in the memoists and metafiction:

Like postmodern writers who metafictionally enter their texts, the memoists intrude upon the fiction of Neanderthal life that they helped create, yet unlike the postmodernists, they question neither their authority nor their capacity to control the "characters" who, in this instance, work for them. (Pogell 467)

While Saunders' fiction does occasionally contain metafiction, such self-referentiality is contained through his characters and their voices. Rather than enter himself in the text, Saunders' exaggerated corporate voice commands the story's satire, often through the use of a memo. One may also read Pogell's distinction as a revealing a key differences between 'generative' and 'degenerative' satire. This use of the memo, and its appropriately satirised corporate voice, constitutes the whole of Saunders story, "Exhortation".

### **"Exhortation"**

In Voltaire's *Candide* (1759), we meet a young boy named Candide who is indoctrinated by his tutor, Professor Pangloss, who espouses a philosophy of optimism. As a representation of unrestrained optimism, Pangloss believes that everything that happens is always for the best. Repeated refrains of optimism extend throughout the story: "all will be well" (24); "All is for the best" (86) in the "best of possible worlds" (96). Similarly, "All will be well and all will be well, etc., etc." is the ending of Saunders's story "Exhortation", the most explicitly satirical in *Tenth of December* (89). In a memo, Todd—who seems like a nice guy caught in a morally ambiguous situation—addresses his staff, asking them to remain positive in their work in order to enjoy it. This sentence that closes the story before the signing of Todd's name— "all

will be well”—cripples the reader whereby the irony destroys all hope that things really will be well. After reading Todd’s memorandum about “March Performance Stats”, the reader is thrust into the paralysing world of working in a system that does not wish to understand them, when positive thinking is amplified to conceal the inner workings of neoliberalism and the abuse of employer-to-employee relations. The memo begins in a very distinctive, satirical Saunders voice:

“I would not like to characterize this as a plea, although it may start to sound like one (!). This fact is, we have job to do, we have tacitly agreed to do it (did you cash your last pay check, I know I did, ha ha ha)” (*Tenth of December* 83).

Like the managers of the pre-history amusement park in “Pastoralia”, Todd has an exaggerated, amusing corporate voice, exposing the malevolent intentions of those in management positions. The voice connects literature to business. Just as employees are exhorted to satisfy their corporate bosses and those in management positions, so too is the reader. Despite the story being written in Todd’s voice, the reader is positioned to identify with the unnamed employees simply addressed as “Staff.” The story, like the memo, is binding: “all is well” is intentionally repeated in order to sustain the notion of Panglossian positive thinking in the face of almost anything else. Unlike Pangloss’s optimism, which is confronted throughout the story by way of natural disasters and cruel human behaviour, Todd’s ‘friendly’ tone and personal attitude is used to deliver a corporate message that is used toward justifying and sustaining cruel human behaviour.

Todd urges his staff to do their job well and he explains how to do this in three ways: the first is not be negative about it; the second is to express a positive mental attitude (even a ‘natural’ attitude is discouraged); and, most importantly, not to think with regard to morals. Two examples are provided, the first detailing the correct mental state to clean a shelf:

Do I want to clean it happy, or do I want to clean it sad? ... And what mental state helps me clean that shelf well and quickly? Is the answer: Negative? A negative mental state? You know very that it is not. So the point of this memo is: Positive. The positive mental state will help you clean that shelf well and quickly, thus accomplishing your purpose of getting paid. (84)

Further, to not do so is to emulate Andy, who Todd shames for being “depressed ... neurotic, and second guessing his actions” (87). Todd’s second example tells us he and his two friends had to lift a dead whale carcass onto a flatbed (84): “Now we all know that is hard. And what would be harder is: doing that with a negative attitude. What we found—Timmy and Vance and I—is that even with only a natural attitude, you are talking a very hard task” (85). The reader is outnumbered, with Todd mentioning other people who are part of his anecdote and supposedly agree with him. They were able to move this whale not with the mental fortitude of a natural or negative thinker, but with help of a former Marine whose wisdom is that the task is “mind over matter” and simply requires “getting psyched up” (85). Anecdotes like these, as mentioned, serve as the basis of Saunders’ criticism of positive thinking and self-improvement. According to Saunders, the destructive nature of thinking positively is that it removes deliberation, subjectivity, and circumstance, replacing these with unreflective compliance and moral aimlessness.

Certainly, Todd enforces an overly instrumentalist (and manipulated) view of the world: “I’m saying let’s try not to dissect every single thing we do in term of ultimate good/bad/indifferent in terms of morals. The time for that is long past” (85). The omission of morals from directed action comes into conflict with regard to a “Room 6” (88). While the specific happenings of the cleaning that occurs in Room 6 is unknown, it is implied the work is sinister. “No one is walking out of Room 6 feeling perfectly okay,” Todd writes: “Even you guys, you who do what must be done in Room 6, don’t walk out feeling so super-great, I know

that, I've certainly done some things in Room 6 that didn't leave me feeling so wonderful" (88). This is how Saunders describes his process regarding this story:

It was just this idea, having worked in corporations, if your corporation was in charge of some sort of nefarious thing (which in America there certainly are already, like those mercenaries—the private military companies), you would manage that thing with jovial memos. So that was the premise. (Lee 2017: 81)

Saunders picks the memo as the perfect medium for his satiric voice, where manipulative but cheerful letters are accentuated and exchanged as a front for some unethical activity; perhaps metaphorical for many corporations today. John Guillory explains that the memo, “gives directions, makes recommendations, but, above all, it is a means of transmitting information within the large bureaucratic structures organising virtually all work in modernity” (Guillory 112). He concludes that although documents existed before modernity is it the dominion of the document that is a “feature of modernity” (113). As a replacement for the business letter, the memo was a form composed by intentionally “eliminating the polite but wordy conventions of the letter-writing tradition” (Yates 489). Todd’s memo, however, is personal, informal, and couched with a textual laughter: “I know I did, ha ha ha” (84); “Janice should have a new baby every week, ha ha” (87). This insertion of chatty qualities blurs the divide between Todd’s personal and professional roles, allowing him the personal rhetoric to conduct professional matter with an ulterior motive. As such the reader is aware of Todd’s insincere remarks about his staff’s well-being, comments that proffer the idea of self-exertion through self-improvement through positive thinking. If we are to follow Saunders’ belief that satire inversely praises what it depicts, then, in this case, Saunders demands sincerity and honesty. Entwined with thinking magically, Americans are reminded that “all will be well,” even if all is not well, even if all is *orwellian*, it will somehow still be well. Above all, such magical thinking obscures realities and circumstance, which is encouraged by the language that encapsulates it.

### Soft Language

While Saunders' satire evidently addresses real world referents, such as positive thinking and neoliberalism, he is more specifically focused on how the manipulation of language is used to obfuscate reality and dehumanise the individual. The effectiveness of Saunders' satire is heavily dependent on his awareness of modernity's bureaucratic language and its ability to conceal truth. Robert McLaughlin writes:

Franzen and Wallace agree that literature has been and continues to be valuable as a way of critiquing our social world, of finding ways to be human in it, and of truly connecting with others. This is a good way to think about the agenda of post-postmodernism, but only if we understand that all these things are mediated through language (McLaughlin 67).

Saunders idiosyncratic corporate voices operate with this understanding, whereby he playfully turns everyday verbs and nouns into corporate speak. Writing in 2010, David Graeber notes that while “*neoliberalism* is a household word” few in the United States have heard of it (80). However, Graeber elucidates the language used in replacement of the term: “If you want to talk about the same issues, in fact, you are forced to reply on obvious propaganda terms like *free trade*, *free-market reforms*, or *globalization*. The bias in the first two is pretty obvious. You don't put the word free in front of a name if you're trying to be neutral about it” (80).

Graeber's observation indicates the ubiquity of the financialisation of language whereby previously understood terms become buried under corporate jargon in non-neutral ways. Writing of the “financialisation of public discourse,” Rojhat Avsar observes that “we refer to language favourable to the interests of the financial industry,” a shift accompanied by neoliberal policies in the 1970s (240). Avsar begins with the question, “What happens if we substitute the word ‘death tax’ for ‘estate tax?’” (239). Whilst both refer to the same thing,

each have varying connotations to elicit different responses. To borrow George Carlin's term, we can refer to this as "soft language"—euphemisms that "[take] the life out of life" to "conceal sins" (Carlin, 1990: n.p.). According to Carlin:

American English is loaded with euphemisms, because Americans have a lot of trouble dealing with reality. Americans have trouble facing the truth, so they invent a kind of a soft language to protect themselves from it. And it gets worse with every generation. (n.p.)

Providing whimsical examples, such as when "toilet paper became bathroom tissue" or "constipation became occasional irregularity," Carlin details the evolution of "shell shock" from its concise two-syllable origin to "battle fatigue" then "Operational Exhaustion" then Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, where "pain is buried under jargon" (n.p.) People are no longer "broke" but have "have a negative cash flow position"; not "fired" but "management wanted to curtail redundancies in the human resources area" (n.p.).

Carlin's stand-up bit was perhaps influenced by Orwell who, in his essay "Politics and the English language", provides similar examples of euphemism:

Millions of peasants are robbed of their farms and sent trudging along the roads with no more than they can carry: this is called transfer of population or rectification of frontiers. People are imprisoned for years without trial, or shot in the back of the neck or sent to die of scurvy in Arctic lumber camps: this is called elimination of unreliable elements. (Orwell 136)

According to Orwell, "political language [consists] largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness" (136). The point here is that this type of language, so heavy in euphemism, is intentionally vague in order to direct attention from what it is supposed to be signifying. The outcome of this "cloudy vagueness" is insincerity, as Orwell further explains:



The inflated style itself is a kind of euphemism. A mass of Latin words falls upon the facts like soft snow, blurring the outline and covering up all the details. The great enemy of clear language is insincerity. When there is a gap between one's real and one's declared aims, one turns as it were instinctively to long words and exhausted idioms, like a cuttlefish spurting out ink. (137)

Saunders has stated that “acronyms and euphemisms [are] elaborate ways of talking around unpleasant realities or hiding agendas” (Saunders and Derby 90-1). As if to continue the attack on euphemism following Orwell and Carlin, Saunders satirises this propaganda-like language to “inverse[ly] praise” a language of sincerity (Z. Smith, 2017). Saunders’ comical adoption of capitalised nouns allows political language to be infused in the minds of his characters, who are forced to believe and repeat such euphemisms.

The ‘soft language’ of corporate rhetoric and power are essential devices in “Pastoralia” that help management obscure and misrepresent reality. Sarah Powell has written of Saunders’ “fascination with corporate discourse and its misrepresentations of reality” (Pogell 461). Indeed, Saunders’ attention to language, tone, and register are essential to the creation of his dystopian landscape. The vernacular of the managerial characters in his stories, particularly in “Pastoralia”, parodies the corporate register by way of distortion, exaggerating its influence so as to appear as part of everyone’s native vernacular. Clare Hayes-Brady appropriately notes that: “those who control the theme park’s vocabulary control its running” (Hayes-Brady 28). In the Neanderthal theme park, the workers are required to complete a “Daily Partner Performance Evaluation Form” (58). When the narrator, at the urging of management, correctly files an unfavourable report on his partner Janet after she breaks

character in front of visitors, the form is later used to complete her dismissal.<sup>6</sup> Janet is replaced by a woman named Linda who refuses to risk her job security by breaking protocol, even so far as refusing to shake the narrator's hand upon introduction: "She frowns at my hand, like: Since when do cave people shake hands?" (65). Where Linda refuses to speak, Janet spoke too often and in ways that were disruptive to the environment. Hayes-Brady asserts that: "By reason of her uncontrolled vocabulary, Janet occupies the position of Foucauldian madman in the oppressive linguistic system of the theme park: the content of her speech is irrelevant because it disrupts the embedded communicative structures of the theme park system" (29). In the memos sent from management, the language is largely imperative, used to persuade and command subordination. Yet, the very act of speaking in "Pastoralia", even in a non-antagonistic manner, is considered insubordination and a threat against the employer.<sup>7</sup> Language is thus intrinsically linked to job performance which, by way of suppression, provides a contemporary critique of the American workplace. Furthermore, in the last memo from management, the narrator is given instructions: "[W]hat you'd want to ask yourself is: Am I Thinking Positive / Saying Positive? Am I giving it all I've got? Am I doing even the slightest thing wrong?" (63). The capitalisation, so very common in Saunders' stories, is an extension of the corporate rhetoric where marketing language and its repetition become

---

<sup>6</sup> With respect to the precariousness of the role the narrator is employed in, it is most evident that the overarching tension within the story are feelings of complicity and uncertainty. The other characters who feature in the text have all left by the story's end; and Janet's removal from her position is prominent in the story's arc as the narrator is forced to step up in 'acting' to match that of his over-enthusiastic new cave partner. Those who survive in "Pastoralia" are not those who succeed at thinking positively, but those who are willing to sacrifice their own subjectivity.

<sup>7</sup> It must be noted that the managers of the park do not appear in person at all in the story—their existence is solely through the written text of their memos.

mantras—a business-like survival tool rooted in American optimism, situated within “corporate discourse” (Hayes-Brady 31), and used toward effective persuasion.

The self-help genre consistently uses soft language as a means of persuasion, particularly those concerned with helping people live their lives prosperously, both socially and financially (the two are usually inseparable, as one often is understood to impact the other.) Saunders’ satirical criticisms of positive thinking extend to both older and contemporary works in the genre. Dale Carnegie’s *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1936) was seminal in paving the way for similar self-help books both in the United States and around the world. Carnegie was born Carnegy but later changed his name to resemble the same spelling as Andrew Carnegie, the industrialist and philanthropist whose company extended the steel industry in the late-nineteenth century. This change of name is perhaps the first marker of Dale Carnegie’s adherence to the ‘benefits’ of deception, not necessarily deception of the self, but of others. *How to Win Friends* is comprised of four parts with each chapter of each part detailing certain principles that the reader should heed in order to accomplish the ‘winning’ of friends and the ‘influencing’ of people. However, nowhere does the book pay any attention to morals. Rather, the wielding of influence is all about the manipulation of another person, and it does this through a strong acceptance of anecdotes provided as ‘evidence’ to believe Carnegie’s principles are effective. In the chapter “Making People Glad to Do What You Want,” Carnegie uses an example of getting a person to clean a stockroom:

When you make your request, put it in a form that will convey to the other person the idea that he personally will benefit ... Will John be happy about doing what you suggest? Probably not very happy, but happier than if you had not pointed out the benefits. (Carnegie 272)

Carnegie’s chapter closes with “Principle 9”, which declares: “Make the other person happy about doing the thing you suggest” (279). This passage would be equally fitting in

“Exhortation,” as Todd states by complaining about a job, or doing it poorly, makes the job “more difficult than it really is” (84), thus insinuating that by removing moral concerns, one removes problems altogether. Carnegie’s book and Todd’s memo operate on this formula: bold opinion, anecdote, and more bold assertions for communication with other people (through a mode of manipulation).

The memo sent to the employees in “Pastoralia” operates with a similar formula regarding the “Shit Fee”:

And so help us help you, by not whining about your Disposal Debit, and if you don’t like how much it costs, try eating less. ... And by the way, we are going to be helping you in this, by henceforth sending less food. We’re not joking, this is austerity. (48)

Saunders is having fun with an absurd idea, but he, too, is not joking. In spite of such treacherous working conditions, it appears to have had little impact on the narrator’s positive outlook, which is so rooted in American optimism and the New England Way. Amidst the anxieties of the narrator’s working life there is also his ongoing concern for his sick son, Nelson, who we are told—via a fax from his wife Louise—has swollen legs but stands staring out the window saying “where is Daddy, why is he never here?” (35). Kasia Boddy proposes that the fact the narrator imitates a caveman to afford his son’s medical costs “is perhaps a comment on the stone-age condition of the American health-care system” (Boddy 4). By the story’s end, the reader is reminded of the story’s beginning, with a committed positive outlook toward all things (“Thinking Positive/Saying Positive”) (1). Upon hearing earlier news that Nelson was suffering from a complete loss of mobility, and the fact that the narrator has to wait another five hours before retreating to his Separate Area, the narrator remains positive. The reason is because he has to make a good impression on Linda, his new co-worker, so as not to jeopardise his own employment like Janet did, by letting personal problems interfere

with work. The separation and firing of workers in the cave point to a fragmented working class in the neoliberal landscape. Yet, despite all adversity, he appears unworried: “[It’s] not a problem. Because I’m Thinking Positive / Saying Positive” (66). There is a certain amount of self-deception at work in order to remain positive despite all adversity. What is ‘real’ is irrelevant if all one needs to do in order to think positive is to *believe*, or force oneself to behave as if one believed.

Indeed, the verisimilitude of “Pastoralia”, where the employees are pretending to accurately depict a diorama of a pre-historic time, is also at work in the minds of the characters via the manipulation of language. Where the beginning of the story sees the narrator feast on a goat, the ending shows the shallow nature of reality in an environment guided by selfish direction. Rather than giving less food, management send literal fake food. Upon hearing a “huge clunk in the Big Slot”, Janet feels relieved and hopes it is “a big thing of Motrin” (49). However, rather than medication to alleviate the pains of hunger, management have sent a plastic goat with a predrilled hole where the spit is able to be placed through:

In terms of austerity, No goat today. In terms of verisimilitude, mount this fake goat and tend as if real. Mount well above fire to avoid burning. In event of melting, squelch fire. In event of burning, leave area, burning plastic may release harmful fumes. (49)

It is a simulacrum, the beginnings of a path toward hyperreality where language is attuned to a voice of directives. This satire of corporate psychobabble with the repetition of “in terms of” and the sentence beginning with “in event of” detail commands like the abbreviated, concise directions in an instruction manual or self-help book.

David Huebert, writing in the context of animal studies and post-humanist thinking, classifies “Pastoralia” (along with “CivilWarLand in BadDecline”) as a “biopolitical dystopia”

where its most important aspect is the “prominent play of spectacle and spectatorship” (Huebert 106). Huebert reads “Pastoralia” as a “human zoo” with specific emphasis on the consumption of meat, asserting: “The politics of meat consumption is not simply a sub-text of ‘Pastoralia’ but a central aspect of Saunders’s critique of modern human life” (113). In this scene, when our naïve narrator places the fake goat above the fire, Hubert remarks that this is where the “bureaucracy of human meat-consumption reaches an apex of inanity” (113). He concludes that, “[t]he task of making the prosthetic goat appear real simply makes explicit what had been implicit all along: the absolute lack of reality in this performance” (113). Even beyond the human-studies context, this comment holds true with regard to persistent binaries between expectations and reality.

Indeed, in attempting to think positive to alleviate troubles, the narrator has believed in a positive thinking experience that has culminated in his further immersion into a simulacrum. These dichotomies between life and work, real and fake, truth and lies, reach their completion in a sentence from management explaining that, “*Truth is that thing which makes what we want to happen happen.*” (62). Such a philosophy offers self-deception and mimics Puysegur’s definition of mesmerism and the self-help tactic espoused by Dale Carnegie. Furthermore, the stories of “Sea Oak” and “Pastoralia”, like many of Saunders’ stories, begin with ethos of a Horatio Alger novel; but, unlike maintaining Alger’s rags-to-riches narrative predicated upon a Puritan work ethic, Saunders’ protagonists stop short of any riches or security, thus laying bare the precarious nature of contemporary America under neoliberalism. The ethos these characters possess—that of thinking positively and working hard—is revealed to be remarkably inadequate, and even destructive. Saunders’ satire exists largely through strong elements of surrealism, humour, and satiric targets with real-world referents; but, he does not stop short of supplementing his satire with compassion and empathy, defining

characteristics of his satire that I will discuss in the following chapter. Further, such compassion appears to offer hope for a better world.

There are utterances throughout Saunders' stories of this sincere hope that things will get better. In "Puppy," Marie, a wealthy woman who was once poor, visits a home to purchase a dog. The seller, Callie, by contrast, is not wealthy; objects like a "spare tire on the dining-room table" and a "crankshaft on a cookie sheet" indicate domestic disorder and a work-life imbalance (*Tenth of December* 38; 41). In addition, Marie notices Callie's son, Bo, tied to a tree in the backyard and forced to drink water from a dog's bowl. Whilst the story hints at a reason why this is the case, Marie yearns to tell Bo that: "Life will not necessarily be like this. Your life could suddenly blossom into something wonderful. It can happen. It happened to me" (41). Ambrose Bierce, in his *The Devil's Dictionary* (1906), defines "FUTURE, n." as: "That period of time in which our affairs prosper, our friends are true and our happiness is assured" (Bierce 112). However, unlike Bierce, Marie is sincere in her evocation of hope for Bo. It is a hope inherited from America's fascination with optimism, of rags-to-riches and the American dream—a hope no longer adequate, and not applicable to everyone. Marie, spooked by Bo's situation, drives away in her Lexus.

### Chapter Three: “A Radical Defense of Tenderness”: Saunders’ Affective Amendment

*In spite of everything, I still believe people are really good at heart*

Anne Frank

*We are obviously a disease ... Like syphilis with a conscience, we should stop reproducing*

Kurt Vonnegut

#### **Introduction**

By way of returning to criticism of “Sea Oak,” David Rando writes of the ability of Saunders’ fiction “to undermine class ontologies” (438). Rando continues by stating that this is “often through powerfully affective moments of formal collision” (438). Indeed, these “powerfully affective moments” of Saunders’ fiction have been described as a “radical defence of tenderness” in a television interview with Stephen Colbert (“George Saunders Has a Nun in His Head”). On the dustjacket to *Tenth of December* Saunders quotes Anton Chekhov’s belief in the purpose of art, one that embodies the modernist notion of the short story: “It should ... prepare us for tenderness. And in this regard it starts, I think, with intention ... Our intention is to crack life open for just a second.” In this chapter, I argue that despite the joyless settings and environments that Saunders depicts in his stories, such bleak settings are used toward provoking empathy and hope—Saunders’ own optimism—through their persuasive creation of affect. In its simplest form, this may seem to offer the reader a way out of the darkness of the absurd and twisted worlds he has us inhabit, but it may also come by way of contradiction given that, as previously discussed, Saunders’ stories often criticise America’s optimism and history of thinking positively. Certainly, Saunders satirises optimism founded on consumerism and financial prosperity, but he appears reluctant to cast all manners of thinking positively aside. Instead, Saunders presents a version of his own hopeful thinking



which—whether delusional or not—proffers hopefulness in the individual and human spirit, if one is to explore their empathetic side. In spite of his biting satire, Saunders frequently suggests that even the voices being satirised are worth being properly understood with context; his empathetic reform, however, is no sure resolution to society's ills. "In general," writes Leonard Feinberg, "satirists are much more skilful at pointing out weaknesses than in defending ... When satirists go in for therapeutics, they usually botch up the job." (1963: 287). Vonnegut, for example, has stated that he has been criticised "for pointing out the weaknesses of society without offering solutions" (*Conversations* 60). Observing incongruities is a different task to providing a solution to them. Certainly, satire should not be expected to resolve society's ills; but it is clear that Saunders' satire differs from his predecessors because his attempt at encouraging transformation through narrative empathy is, rather, a positive and optimistic alternative. Saunders' approach to satire expands upon simpler understandings of generative and degenerative satire by utilising their characteristics toward a moral, compassionate, and empathetic engagement with his reader.

Joshua Ferris, in his introduction to the 2016 edition of *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline*, writes of the "all-too-common mistake critics make when talking about Saunders, which is to call him a satirist in the early style of Mark Twain" (Ferris xiv). Indeed, the many reviews and testimonials of Saunders, as quoted in the first chapter, all contain two similar themes: Saunders' undoubted originality, and his work as a continuation of Twain, Pynchon, and Vonnegut—all notably either generative or degenerative satirists. In rectifying this comparison to satirists of the past, Ferris argues that Saunders' fiction goes *beyond* satire:

[W]hile Saunders does satirise, or, in other words, render the real absurd, he also carefully and lovingly and artfully renders the absurd real, which is a much harder trick to pull off and, once done, moves the so-called satirist out of the pigeonhole and in to the open air of the first-rate artist. (xiv)

The adverbs “lovingly and artfully” distinguish Saunders’ satire from Juvenal’s anger, or much satire of the nineteenth century. In stories which depict the utter dehumanisation of the individual under neoliberalism, as in “Pastoralia,” Saunders “renders the absurd real,” by way of writing compassionate fiction that attempts to humanise and familiarise another person through empathy. Satire is one part of Saunders’ art, and as a consequence, does not constitute its whole.

Ferris is not the only writer to refrain from reading Saunders as a satirist. There is, as critics often suggest, something more to Saunders’ satire, which, unsurprisingly, is what Saunders himself appears to hope for. Yet, like satirists before and after him, Saunders is not necessarily comfortable with the description, stating:

I’ve just learned to accept it, inaccurate as I feel it might be. To me, satire is more one-dimensional and sure of its relation to its subject. I’ve always – always – thought of myself as a fiction writer with comic inclinations. So this recurring identification as a satirist doesn’t really bother me but I can’t do much with it.  
(Saunders, *The White Review*, n.p.)

His indifference to the term, like any classification, derives from what he perceives to be the limitation it imposes on the reading of a text: “[If] someone feels that’s all I’m doing [satire] – that that’s the primary mission – then I’ve failed” (n.p.). Sam Lipsyte is perhaps the only writer who has explicitly sought to displace Saunders from the continuing classification, writing in his testimonial for *The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil*:

Many critics refer to Saunders as a satirist, and though the term is often used in conjunction with names like Swift and Twain, it can also be a trap. The world a satirist creates, some charge, is only a prediction or, at best, a distortion, as though all successful art isn’t about distorting, or bending, reality. Another word that gets fastened to Saunders is moralist. These two terms are often intertwined, of course. At the core of much satire is some kind of prescription. Still, even if

correct, these two labels, the limitations of the first and the taint of the scold in the second, don't do justice to Saunders. His bleak but merciful stories contain a great deal more than satire, or at least the toothless send-ups that often stand in for satire ... (Lipsyte n.p.)

Here, Lipsyte—perhaps channelling his own personal frustration with artistic classifications—uses his review of *The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil* to contest the restriction of the term, simultaneously arguing that Saunders' satire, even if an apt description, must be understood to operate outside of its conventional use. Whilst few of Saunders' works reveal themselves strictly as satires, mainly because of their brevity and limited perspectives—"Ask the Optimist!", "My Amendment", "Exhortation" to name a few examined in this thesis—the majority of Saunders' fiction attempts something beyond the humorous exposure of vice and folly, and thus provides more than a "one-dimensional" approach to its subject and theme. In doing so, it not only possesses an identifiable moralism, but also a prescription laced with emotion—an intensely affective aesthetic component to Saunders' satiric critique. The effect of Saunders' satire is its production of affect. For Saunders, his reputation as a satirist is a thorn in his side (Ward n.p.). Despite this, it is unjust to encapsulate Saunders' affective, compassionate fiction as still within satire's protean nature, nor view Saunders' satire as representative of certain post-postmodern poetics, just as theorists have challenged definitions of satire.

### **The Results of Satire**

While John Dryden stated that "the true end of satire is the amendment of vices by correction" (93), the effects of satire, particularly its ability to transform and provoke change, have consistently been questioned by scholars. Dustin Griffin writes that satire is "open-ended"

and “more inclined to ask questions than to provide answers” (5). Ruben Quintero, on the other hand, addresses the question of satire’s responsibility in resolution:

[The] satirist is not obligated to solve what is perceived as a problem or replace what is satirically disassembled or unmasked with a solution. It is missing the mark to claim, as some have done, that Joseph Heller’s World War II novel *Catch-22* (1961) is not satirical because it offers no alternative to the self-defeating logic of an inescapable Catch-22. (3)

Evidently, the satirist is not required to solve dissimulation, vice, and folly, for wars still exist after Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969). Furthermore, in an interview with The Library of Congress, musician Randy Newman—famous for his heavily satirical and ironic songs—sarcastically expresses this sentiment:

The amount of songs I’ve written about race—y’know the racial divide in the country—uh, I would’ve never dreamed I would have written so many of them, and I think I’m all done. I mean, my songs have pretty much solved the problem, and I don’t have to do it anymore. Everyone gets along now. (Newman n.p.)

The satirist’s responsibility is, as previously mentioned, that of raising awareness and exposing vice and folly. As Newman sarcastically suggests, the satirist’s job is not in the practical nature of resolution, thus Newman’s art should not be expected to resolve the themes his music addresses, whether that be slavery, racism, or financial inequality. Likewise, Saunders’ stories are clearly not policy-making documents that will subsequently overthrow the ills of late capitalism and mass consumerism. Like that of a smoke detector, the satirist’s alarm is loud in their claims of human and societal degradation. Certainly, just as it is unjustifiable to expect a smoke detector to also eradicate a fire’s blaze, it is equally unfair to anticipate immediate transformation at the conclusion of a satiric work.

However, in spite of satire's (or the satirist's) abdication of the requirement to resolve its complaints, generative satire's function can be understood to be transformative, even though it may not afford either society or the reader with any objective resolution. David Worcester sees this resolution as laughter with purpose, stating that the laughter of comedy is rather "purposeless," whereas the "laughter of satire is directed toward an end" (37). Likewise, M. H. Abrams elucidates this sense of satire's purpose in his *Glossary of Literary Terms*: "The diverse types of *satire* are didactic in that they are designed, by various devices of ridicule, to alter the reader's attitudes toward certain types of people, institutions, products, and modes of conduct" (65). Abrams uses the words "designed" and "alter", but what he is writing about is intentional persuasion, comparable to the "consensus-building" approach that Weisenburger discussed with regard to generative satire's rhetorical nature (2). Moreover, Edward Allan Bloom and Lillian D. Bloom title their study of satire, *Satire's Persuasive Voice* (1979), wherein they suggest the "capacity of some satire to effect a gradual moral reawakening, a reaffirmation of positive social and individual values" (16). "If we are moved positively by satire," they write, "we respond to a plea for a return to our senses, moral, intellectual, and aesthetic" (Bloom and Bloom 16-19). This is a grand description of transformation that favours satire's rhetorical nature by way of assuming that "some satire" can provoke a "moral awakening" (19). Interestingly, this image of the satirist as a custodian of virtue is evidenced in a seventeenth-century theory of satire, which depicts the satirist as a physician who administers a "medicinal morall", a rather apt description for many satirists (Randolph 143). Likewise, by keeping his books short, Kurt Vonnegut strived to have his stories read by people in political power, simply because he was aware that those in politics have little time to read larger works of fiction. "I've worried some about why write books when Presidents and generals do not read them," Vonnegut said, "and the university experience taught me a very good reason: you catch people before they become generals and

Senators and Presidents, and you *poison their minds with humanity*. Encourage them to make a better world” (Vonnegut 5; original emphasis). Saunders, too, is trying to make a better world. “He is trying to change the way people think,” says Professor Richard Mills, “in a very subtle fashion” (Mills n.p.). Indeed, the transformation and resolution here is not that of resolving the satiric target, but of rousing awareness in the audience. It is mental not physical. As such, satiric reform must be considered as “conceptual and figurative” rather than a literal proposition” (Bloom and Bloom 18). There is no doubt that Saunders’ intent is to provoke change, but his method of persuasion through affect is of peculiar interest.

“The final test for satire,” asserts Gilbert Highet, “is the typical emotion which the author feels and wishes to evoke in his readers. It is a blend of amusement and contempt. In some satirists, the amusement outweighs the contempt” (Highet 21). Highet argues that satirists, by critiquing society, differ not just in tone, but in the emotion their audience is presumed to feel. Similarly, Arthur Pollard in *Satire* (1970) states that satirists move readers to “criticize and condemn” through “various emotions ranging from laughter through ridicule, contempt and anger to hate” (47). This sense of feeling is how scholars often explain the differences between Juvenalian and Horatian satire: Juvenal’s satire is rather indignant and personal, attempting to rouse anger in the reader, whilst on the other hand Horace’s satire is received in a more tolerant manner that seeks a wry smile with its ridicule, devoid of Juvenal’s harshness. Writing of Henry Miller, Highet likens Miller’s “passion for obscenity” with that of Aristophanes and Rabelais but stops short of aligning their satire any further: “The difference is that in spite of its absurdities and hypocrisies they love mankind. Miller, like Swift, believes that humanity is a filthy crime” (50). Here we have a difference not just of a satire’s rhetorical, linguistic, and literary components, but of satire’s effect; and, more importantly, of differing *affect* that is produced in the reader. Saunders, as I will explore, seeks to elicit love and empathy rather than condemnation from his reader. This focus on tenderness and readerly

engagement echoes the many sentiments of postmodern writers who sought, and still seek, a space beyond postmodernism, especially Saunders' conception of the reader entering a "black box" where "something important ... happens to the reader" upon entry and exit (*Braindead Megaphone* 78). In classifying satirists, Highet refers to Jonathan Swift and posits that, for Swift, "all reality ... was debased," saying that he:

... could not believe that human beings would ever make use of their capacities for kindness, reason, and nobility; and, although outwardly a member of the Christian church, he believed so strongly in original sin and so little in the supernatural that he saw, neither in his own faith nor in its founder, any possibility of redemption. (Highet 160)

In this vein, we may consider Swift's work—particularly *A Modest Proposal* (1729)—to have the anger of Juvenal but little in the way of reformation or transformation. Unlike the works of Feinberg and Frye, Highet's influential study reserves space for a brief discussion of this dissimilarity among satirists (and within their oeuvre), with Highet dividing satirists into two types: the "misanthropic satirist" and the "optimist" (235), primarily categorised with regard to their opinions of evil. The misanthropic satirist, he argues, "looks at life and finds it, not tragic, nor comic, but ridiculously contemptible and nauseatingly hateful" (235). On the other hand, the optimist, "believes that folly and evil are not innate in humanity, or, if they are, they are eradicable" (235); whilst laughing and sneering, they "persuade more than they denounce" (237). Furthermore, these two types of satirists indicate two rather divergent purposes for satire: "The optimist writes in order to heal, the pessimist in order to punish. One is a physician, the other an executioner" (237). Such a classification of satirists and their work is admittedly rather narrow, rejecting the many nuances abundant (which Highet does point out) and thus it is important to remember that a satirist may write one work as a misanthrope and the next as an optimist.

Saunders' fiction, however, does not differ wildly from misanthropic to optimistic. Weisenburger notes that "despite all its surface disorder or its outright meanness, traditional satire was both written and read in hopes of a return to order and grace" (14)—a sentiment most obviously shared by Saunders, who situates grace as the antithesis of capitalism. "I ended up working for engineering companies," says Saunders, "and that's where I found my material, in the everyday struggle between capitalism and grace" (Solomon n.p.). While Saunders is vocal in his criticism of capitalism, his stories, like traditional satire, can be read to provoke a hopeful, emotional transformation. Those in *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline* (1997) are arguably more preoccupied with surrealism in his satire and a particular playfulness as a way to satirise capitalist structures. By comparison, *Tenth of December* (2010) is his most sentimental collection yet. The artifice, the reconstruction, and the amusing hyperreal worlds of *CivilWarLand* still remain in Saunders' fiction, but only to a limited extent. As Saunders' satiric setting and tone has changed, it has gradually been supplanted by a much stronger sentimental streak, and a hopefulness that is distinctively Saunders'—an advocacy of moral being predicated upon the notion that empathy can provoke change for a better world.

### *The Very Persistent Gappers of Frip*

This turn toward affect, and a continual advocacy for human kindness in provoking change, is particularly evident in Saunders lesser-known novella, *The Very Persistent Gappers of Frip* (2000), a cautionary tale written for children.<sup>8</sup> Centred around a young girl, Capable, the story tells of Capable and her father's struggles to remain financially afloat as "gappers" continue to

---

<sup>8</sup> The fact that this book is written for children is perhaps reason for the story's more pronounced and overt turn toward affect. However, while the story's content is void of the crude language and violence in Saunders' story collections, the satirical targets and affective intentions operate in a similar fashion.



attack their goats. Their situation is pitted against their neighbours, The Romos and the Ronsens, who, unlike Capable, possess a disposition of selfishness that is imbued by a puritan work ethic without regard to circumstance, a gesture toward the conservative politics of WASP America. “I believe we make our own luck in this word,” Sid Ronsen says (35). His luck, it is expressed, is symptomatic of his hard work; his hard work thus a sign of deserved privileges: “I believe that when my yard is suddenly free of gappers, why, that is because of something good I have done. Because ... I have always been a hard worker” (35). Echoes of Calvinism and the Protestant work ethic are certainly evident. Put simply, the Romos and Ronsens do not believe in luck, for to do so would be an admission of circumstance that, perhaps, no two comparisons of hard work are identical, nor the benefits that such work yields.

When Capable asks her more fortunate neighbours for assistance with her “gapper” problem, she is sent a letter, stating: “We regret to inform you that, although we are very sympathetic to your significant hardships, don’t you think it would be better if you took responsibility for your own hardships?” (36). This letter—a popular medium for Saunders’ idiosyncratic satire—could equally have come from any other Saunders story, particularly the corporate speak in “Pastoralia” or “Exhortation.” Moreover, it is notable how often Saunders uses the language of sympathy in such letters, which serves to show its difference from empathy, and also reveal the artificial nature of apology and regret in managerial speak. Capable, as a character, is also composed of the same subjugated characteristics that make up Saunders’ other oppressed, working-class characters, albeit younger for the book’s target audience. We learn that earlier, before the gapper problem worsened, “her mother had died” (8) and we are given a sympathetic observation: “It was a hard life, and it made her tired” (10). In response to Capable’s gapper problem, her closest neighbours, the Romos, physically move their house further away so as to not share Capable’s problem, simultaneously refusing to help

her. They do this under the belief that their lack of a gapper problem is the result of a “miracle,” openly “thanking God for giving us whatever trait we have that keeps us so free of gappers” (17, 49). The refusal to help Capable, even when moving their house is the other option, is humorously depicted in Saunders’ dialogue:

“...Are those gappers our gappers? Are those goats our goats?”

“They certainly are not. They are her goats and her gappers, as indicated by the fact that they are in her yard. Is her yard our yard? I think not.”

“I feel that our yards are our yards,” said Bea Romo. (33)

Here, there is a level of redundancy in the language which is tied to the notion of private property and possession, and the logic of affect. It does not make sense for Bea to say “I feel” with regard to the ownership of yards, yet this element of affect has crept into a discourse which emphasises individual responsibility, working against the idea of shared feeling. The repetition between these characters is comical, exaggerated to the point of being ridiculous, especially when Sid advises Capable to “work harder,” demanding her to: “Be more efficient than you’ve even been before. In fact, be more efficient than is physically possible. I know that’s what I’d do” (45). Interestingly, after receiving this advice, Saunders writes that Capable returns with a book called “*How to Fish for Fish*”—a subtle insertion of America’s aforementioned fascination with self-help and self-improvement in the face of struggle.<sup>9</sup> It also echoes George Carlin’s comical statement that there is no such thing as self-help: “If you’re looking for self-help why would you read a book written by somebody else? That’s not

---

<sup>9</sup> Self-improvement does not even require struggle or adversity, as the path to improvement is endless, something often seen in self-help books where many are titled along the lines of ‘How to Get Richer’, thus depicting wealth as limitless—though I am sure no one, if questioned as to how they acquired their fortune, has responded that it came from heeding the advice of a financial self-help book.

self-help, that's help. There's no such thing as self-help. If you did it yourself you didn't need help" (Carlin, 2001: n.p.).

However, the Romo's and Ronsen's goats soon stop producing milk. In contrast, Capable's path of self-improvement has taught her how to fish, and to provide for herself and her father. Yet, Capable is aware of a difference: "And she soon found that it was not all that much fun being the sort of person who eats a big dinner in a warm house whilst others shiver on their roofs in the dark" (70). In his 2005 commencement speech to Syracuse University, George Saunders had this to say: "What I regret most in my life are *failures of kindness*. Those moments when another human being was there, in front of me, suffering, and I responded . . . sensibly. Reservedly. Mildly" (*Congratulations* n.p.). Nowhere in this speech does Saunders hold himself up as a model to emulate, either through his literary success or human values, but instead he chooses to focus on a quality that he believes makes a more conscientious, empathetic person: to "err in the direction of kindness" (*Congratulations* n.p.). Capable, too, errs in the direction of kindness, inviting her neighbours over for dinner in spite of the fact that they had committed failures of kindness themselves. *The Very Persistent Gappers of Frip* does indeed, as briefly evidenced, represent various upstanding qualities—kindness, generosity, compassion and community—but it also furthers the progression of these qualities so that the story ends on a note that, upon closer inspection, is unlike the conclusions exhibited in the fiction of Vonnegut. "And life got better," writes Saunders: "Not perfect, but better" (75-6). "If Saunders rejects the self-orientation of 'classic' self-help," writes Kasia Boddy, "he is nevertheless committed to a form of self-culture. Working to become 'our best selves,' his stories insist, is possible, or perhaps even more likely, in the worst environments" (Boddy 9). Saunders, however, plays a part in this form of "self-culture" as author of the text, able to construct perspectives that, whether successful or not, are intent on arousing an emotional connection to a story through affect and empathy. The Romo's and Ronsen's privileged

position, and their refusal to empathise, are satirised by Saunders through hyperbole and ironic humour. This representation does not seek to condemn them for not being good Samaritans, but rather exaggerates their gross entitlement as a way of inversely praising Capable's benevolence.

### **Narrative Empathy**

Saunders' satire is firmly grounded in empathetic connection with his reader, achieved by way of point of view, free-indirect discourse, and violence. This emotional capacity within satire is supported by Saunders' view of his satiric target, an approach which he describes is a way of saying, "I love this culture" (Sacks n.p.). For Saunders, appreciation of the satiric target is paramount. "[I]t's hard to be sufficiently involved in satirizing something you don't like," he says. Upon further explanation, Saunders relates such involvement as akin to love:

Satire is, I think, a sort of bait-and-switch. You decide to satirize something, so you gaze at it hard enough and long enough to be able to say something true and funny and maybe angry or critical—but you first had to gaze at it for a long time. I mean, gazing is a form of love, right? (Sacks n.p.).

In contrast to other satires which arouse criticism at the expense of the satiric target, Saunders' understanding of satire's target is entwined with compassion, which he explains by way of attention: "You are paying attention to the thing, spending your time on it, which is a form of ... something. Love?" (Sacks n.p.). One can hear echoes of Simone Weil: "Attention, taken to its highest degree, is the same thing as prayer. It presupposes faith and love" (Weil 117). For Saunders, then, to satirise effectively, one must pay attention to that which is in need of correction, and such an engagement is a form of love. This emotional, compassionate aspect to his satire is one area which has been written about countless times, and it is one that, I

believe, demarcates Saunders' satire from that of his predecessors and contemporaries. In an interview with *VICE*, Saunders says that: "When we imagine a character, we're basically having a conversation with somebody other than ourselves" (Yeh n.p.). This interview is appropriately titled, "George Saunders Thinks Empathy Can Still Save Us." Indeed, Layne Nepper believes that: "[Saunders] is not a traditional satirist ... We are asked to understand, not condemn; the satirist's intent has been redirected away from correction toward empathy" (295). Consequently, it appears that Saunders is not a "misanthropic satirist" (Highet 235) at all. Rather, his satires—which attempt to raise awareness and a moral awakening of sorts—are firmly grounded in the psychological states of his characters used toward eliciting empathy in his reader.

Indeed, empathy, a term almost as troublesome to define as satire, is sustained throughout Saunders' fiction. His characters are constantly faced with moral dilemmas and emotionally difficult situations which are used to induce in the reader a state of empathy. Charles Yu views Saunders' approach to language as merging words and feelings together "until they reach some kind of thermodynamic phase change, a critical point in the empathy of the system, near which the distinction between self and other starts to melt" (Yu n.p.). In this context, Michael Basseler analyses how emotion in Saunders' stories engages the reader into a "compassionate relationship with the characters" (Basseler 153). Basseler writes: "Despite all satire ... there is always Saunders' deep humanism serving as a counterbalance and, perhaps, constituting something like the aesthetic *and* ethical core of his writing" (153). However, rather than view Saunders' pronounced humanism as separate, or even antithetical to his satire, I view it as a critical component of the satire itself.

Therefore, to understand this "ethical core" within Saunders' stories, it is necessary to conceptualise a working understanding of empathy and its function in literary fiction. Like

Basseler's conceptual framework, which follows the theoretical groundwork established by Suzanne Keen and Fritz Berithaupt (155), I too will draw on recent theories in empathy studies to provide a contemporary understanding of empathy. In a recent publication in the field of empathy studies, editors Meghan Hammond and Sue Kim state that: "literary empathy studies investigate how 'thinking with' or 'feeling with' another happens within literary texts or because of literary texts, how writers represent empathetic experience and how they provoke, promote, or prevent it in readers" (1). Indeed, although empathy and its precursor sympathy have varied histories and theories, notably in David Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* (1736) and Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), this ability to think and feel *with* another exists in many contemporary understandings of empathy. By the 1960s, to sympathise began to signify "to feel for" or "to pity" (Hammond and Kim 7) as opposed to empathy's meaning of feeling and thinking *with*. This prepositional change infers empathy's closer connection in response to another person and/or their situation, which Nancy Eisenberg cogently expands upon, defining empathy as: "an affective response that stems from the apprehension or comprehension of another's emotional state or condition, and which is similar to what the other person is feeling or would be expected to feel" (Eisenberg 72). Sympathy, in contrast, is centred more upon understanding an imaginative connection than mutual experience alone—"an emotional response stemming from the apprehension of another's emotional state or condition that is not the same as the other's state or condition, but consists of feelings of sorrow or concern for the other" (72). Empathy, feeling *with* rather than *for*, is imperative in understanding another person's situation insofar as it requires one to imagine and feel joy and suffering of those who are different from themselves. It is no wonder so many scholars are interested in the imaginative experience of reading.

Indeed, in defining empathy within contemporary contexts, the idea of perspective shifting, of adopting the position of another person in order to understand them better,

extends throughout scholarly literature. As such, I believe it is beneficial to borrow Amy Coplan's account of empathy, which requires the following conditions:

(1) the empathizer experiences psychological states that are either identical or very similar to those of the target, (2) perspective-taking—the empathizer imaginatively experiences that target's experiences from the target's point of view, (3) (1) is the case by virtue of (2), and (4) the empathizer maintains self-other differentiation. These four features are essential to empathy and help to distinguish it from related psychological processes that are often confused or conflated with it, such as emotional contagion and sympathy. (Coplan 144)

It is significant that empathy, in this context, maintains a differentiation between self and the other, which distinguishes it from many simulation theories that propose the removal of the self in the process of empathising. More importantly, however, is how these four features of empathy relate to literary fiction, and, of course, Saunders' satire. This understanding of empathy illuminates an obvious affective streak in Saunders' satire that attempts to go beyond generative satire's engagement with its reader.

As Michael Basseler has explored, one way of examining empathy and compassion in Saunders' fiction is by way of narratology. Suzanne Keen's prominent work in narratology and literature led her to develop a definition of 'narrative empathy,' which is defined as: "the sharing of feeling and perspective-taking induced by reading, viewing, hearing, or imagining narratives of another's situation and condition" (Keen, 2006: 7). This type of empathy is indirectly explained in Saunders' essay "Thought Experiment," wherein Saunders has his reader ponder the projected life journeys of two babies from their situation at birth, born "at precisely the same moment":

Baby One is healthy, with a great IQ and all its limbs and two kind, intelligent, nondysfunctional parents. Baby Two is sickly, not very bright, is missing a limb or two, and is the child of two self-absorbed and stupid losers, one of whom has

not been seen around lately, the other of whom is a heroin addict. (*Braindead Megaphone* 169)

This illustration provides the context for the essay's argument, which begs the questions: "What did Baby One *do* to deserve this fortunate birth? Or, conversely, what did Baby Two *do* to deserve the unfortunate birth?" (170). These questions are not answered in Saunders' fiction, but his characters are very rarely situated between the two babies' situations; they are either privileged in terms of power or money, or are the product of unfortunate circumstances, like Baby Two, or Aunt Bernie ("Why do some people get everything and I got nothing?"). With regard to Baby Two's situation, Saunders asks: "Why is it ... so natural for us to blame a person for being the person she is, to expect her to autocorrect her shrillness, say, or to will herself into a perkier, more efficient person?" (171). Those who struggle are not necessarily the victims of a "failure of intention," (172) as they are the victims of circumstance. No amount of self-improvement can "autocorrect" the life journey for someone whose "innate level of pluck" begins at life's conception (172).

For all its recognisable objections to capitalism's worship of willpower, however, "Thought Experiment" resolves itself on the idea of unchangeable circumstance. However, Saunders uses this idea of unchangeable circumstance as an argument for empathising with others, noting that the "upshot of all of this is not a passive moral relativism that makes the bearer incapable of action in the world" (172). This focus is not defeatist, but optimistic—a sincere belief in the possibility of change. By way of example, Saunders composes a situation where someone continually comes to his house and drives over his chickens—a straightforward and simple example: murdering someone else's chickens is bad. However, in seeking resolution, Saunders proposes that his situation "actually *improves*" as he realises "that your desire to flatten my chickens is organic" and is not "objectively evil" (172) as, like the example of babies at birth, it is innate and the product of circumstance. Here we have change



occurring not within the mind and actions of the aggressor, but of the victim—the person whose emotional framework is more empathetic. This is one reaction to the situation. As Saunders continues, he argues that one’s harmful desires “can be changed”:

[By] dropping the idea that your actions are Evil, and that you are Monstrous, I enter a new moral space, in which the emphasis is on seeing with clarity, rather than judging; on acting in the most effective way (that is, the way that most radically and permanently protects my chickens), rather than on constructing and punishing a Monster. (172)

Herein lies a rather concise example of Saunders’ optimistic outlook. “By resisting the urge to reduce,” he concludes, “in order to subsequently destroy, we keep alive—if only for a few seconds more—the possibility of transformation” (173). Saunders’ project of self-improvement is concerned not with financial prosperity or to influence people, but rather to *understand*—to act more effectively by engaging in a project of cultivated empathetic connection with others. Layne Neeper, in his article on Saunders’ postmodern satire, appropriately notes that “Saunders’ stories intend only one development: the empathetic improvement of his audience” (284-5). Indeed, “Thought Experiment,” despite not mentioning the word once, is primarily an argument for empathy, that which is “other-directed” and “involves the comprehension of the other in the other’s circumstances” (Gallagher 376). Saunders’ use of narrative and point of view is thus an essential component in constructing the perspective of the other.

### Point of View

In attempting to elicit empathy from the reader, Saunders meticulously conveys his characters’ inner thoughts and feelings by way of carefully constructed points of view. Saunders’ use of narrative point of view allows his readers to feel personally involved with the ethical choices

a character is forced to make and is crucial for narrative empathy. In “Escape from Spiderhead,” one of the more disturbing stories of *Tenth of December*, a murderer named Jeff serves his time in a research facility which tests drugs that control human emotions and feelings using a “MobiPak”—a type of surgically appended device attached to one’s back. Saunders’ trademark humour is apparent in this story, and so too is the satire, which criticises power relations and big pharma. However, the story can be read as a meta-text of Saunders’ narrative technique and as a metaphor for the way his fiction functions and what it seeks to achieve. In a story which focuses on the manipulation of strong human emotions, it is Saunders’ obvious guidance and control of the reader’s own emotional capacity that warrants interest.

The story begins with Jeff, our first-person narrator, under the influence of “Verbaluce™,” a drug which controls one’s diction and linguistic capability, allowing one to narrate one’s experience under the drugs in a more eloquent, sophisticated manner: “He added some Verbaluce™ to the drop, and soon I was feeling the same things but saying them better” (46). Later, Jeff is subjected to a combination of drugs which have him repeatedly make love to two women, Heather and Rachel, one after the other, in spite of the fact that before dosing Jeff does not find either woman attractive: “Dark hair. Average build. Nothing special, just like, upon first entry, Heather had been nothing special” (52). Jeff’s first-person narration increases the reader’s understanding of his manipulated mood swings, from high doses of love to immediate come-downs. “I guess I was sad love was not real?,” ponders Jeff. He continues: “...I guess I was sad that love could feel so real and the next minute be gone, and all because of something Abnesti was doing” (55). However, the story takes a dark turn—from love to despair—when Abnesti, the prison warden, forces Jeff to induce either Heather or Rachel with “Darkenfloxx™,” a drug that makes you feel the worst you have ever felt—“times ten”

(56). Jeff expresses concern for an Other, either real or imagined in his opinion of the experiment:

But, having once been Darkenfloxxed™, I just didn't want to do that to anyone. Even if I didn't like the person very much, even if I hated the person, I still wouldn't want to do it. (56-7)

Jeff, however, is then forced to watch Heather be Darkenfloxxed™ even after his firm protestation against it (67). Jeff describes his feelings in the face of such a horrific act:

Basically, what I was feeling was: Every human is born of man and woman. Every human, at birth, is, or at least has the potential to be, beloved of his/her mother/father. Thus every human is worthy of love. As I watched Heather suffer, a great tenderness suffused my body, a tenderness hard to distinguish from a sort of vast existential nausea; to wit, why are such beautiful beloved vessels made slaves to such pain? (69)

In the midst of a gruesome suicide, Saunders' uses Jeff's ethical dilemma as a vessel for empathetic concern, as a way of reinforcing the capacity for love, even for those whom we do not personally know. However, Saunders' own authority in this piece is not unlike the control Abnesti has over Jeff. The complexities of the author-character-reader relationship are on display here, as Saunders acts as the reader's own experimenter—forcefully dosing the reader with varying tone, register, point of view, and contextual information about other characters. It is thus a meta-text commentary of Saunders' own literary style and technique. Unlike the metafiction of the twentieth century, Saunders uses this commentary toward engagement with his reader, not merely a “knowingness that dissolves commitment into irony” (Gitlin 100).

The point here is that our own empathetic concern for others should not be restricted by not having a personal connection to them. Abnesti attempts to persuade Jeff that the experiment is not ethically deficient, detailing that dosing Heather with Darkenfloxx™ can be

interpreted as a moral action: “Can I suggest that, if you knew what I know about Heather’s past, making Heather briefly sad, nauseous, and/or horrified might not seem like the worst idea in the world? No, I can’t” (67-8). Abnesti’s speech is deliberately evasive and includes the use of back slash—a feature used in other voices of Saunders’ fiction. Rather than provide sincere, direct language, Abnesti uses the backslash and negative questions to restrict options and confuse Jeff. Despite the fact the Abnesti says he cannot make such a suggestion, all dialogue here that precedes Heather’s dosing is a strong coercion of Jeff’s will in which Jeff’s privileges are threatened (69). Additionally, his questions “Can I suggest?” and “Can I imply” are evasive. The rhetorical nature of his questions (“Am I a monster?”) linguistically increase persuasion and dampen the severity of Heather’s situation, positioning Jeff as the subject, not Heather. This persuasion makes the idea of empathising with another seem like an unjustifiable position, as Abnesti argues that Heather’s pain is not only legitimate but warranted and deserved. Heather’s death, described as a utilitarian sacrifice in a scientific exploration of “the unknown” (72), is followed by the death of Rachel. On this occasion Jeff presents the rationale:

Per Rachel’s file, she had stolen jewellery from her mother, a car from her father, cash from her sister, statues from their church. She’d gone to jail for drugs. After four times in jail for drugs, she’d gone to rehab for drugs, then to rehab for prostitution, then to what they call rehab refresh, for people who’ve been in rehab so many times they are basically immune. But she must have been immune to the rehab refresh, too, because after that came her biggie: a triple murder—her dealer, the dealer’s sister, the dealer’s sister’s boyfriend. (74)

Upon reading Rachel’s file, Jeff is no more morally comfortable than before: “I still didn’t want to kill her,” he comments (74). This remark, coupled with the surreal context of the story, is delivered in an almost naïve, deadpan manner. This is in spite of the grotesque life-or-death nature of the scene. As Basseler notes, “[Saunders] central characters have no choice

but to acknowledge another's pain" (159). Jeff is conspicuously placed in an ethical dilemma which requires action or some type of protest. John Hawkins remarks of this moral dilemma in response to the stories in *In Persuasion Nation*:

Saunders primarily transcends satire in these stories by placing a conscientious objector within the text itself, a person or persons for whom the absurdity carries real emotional weight ... These stories depend upon the human to place the inhumanity of the landscapes in context, almost as a kind of internal accountability. (Hawkins 72)

Saunders does not, I contend, transcend satire as such; instead this aspect of his fiction constitutes his own mixture of satire's makeup. More importantly, it is the reader, not Saunders' character subjects, who is the real subject of the 'Spiderhead' experiment. Saunders' manipulation of the reader to empathise with the author's desired target through intense first-person narration and stream-of-consciousness storytelling is, interestingly, what the story is about; but it also provides a meta-textual commentary on Saunders' own attempt to alter the minds of his readers. Furthermore, in an era dominated by neoliberal corporate speak, Saunders' fiction also points toward the complexities of authority and persuasion, reminding us about neoliberalism's invasion of privacy, and the ways in which all sorts of information and values can occupy our mental space and pervert our attitude of the world.

One of the targets of Saunders' satire in "Spiderhead" is the unethical tendencies of the drug testing industry, yet Saunders is not averse to using drugs as a tool for furthering his own ethical agenda. Moreover, "Spiderhead" is not the first time Saunders has used drugs as a plot device to gain further access to his characters' mindsets, either to reveal their true expression, or their inability to freely express themselves. In "Jon," the title character is one of many teenagers called "TrendSetters & Tastemakers" who reside in a facility where their task is to test products for advertising companies. The characters of "Jon" are happy

consumers first, human beings second. Saunders' stories, so finely tuned toward empathy and affect, reveal the gruesome underside of this type of managed feeling through satire. In the instance that these workers lose positivity and/or become disaffected with the grotesque working environment, they are given a dose of "Aurabon®", which acts as an anti-depressant to "makes things better" (*In Persuasion Nation* 43); it is also referred to as "Mr. Slippen's Facility Morale Initiative" (29) and acquired by filling out a "Work-Affecting Mood-Problem Notification" (43). Like the rest of the stories in *In Persuasion Nation*, "Jon" is concerned with the dangers of technology and mass consumerism: the teenagers are stuck within a type of commercial prison, entirely subservient to completing the work of marketing companies—even their memories are told through the medium of infomercials:

I was feeling, why is she looking so frantic with furrowed anxious brow like that Claymation chicken at LI 98473 who says the sky is falling the sky is falling and turns out it is only a Dodge Ramcharger which crushes her from on high and one arm of her or wing sticks out with a sign that says March Madness Daze? (41)

Like their drug-induced, regulated emotions, their memories are likewise curated and controlled. With this understanding, one can view affect as both a problem for Saunders' societies, but something Saunders also believes is the solution. Thus, Saunders satirises emotion in order suggest something different—a praise for empathy. Jon's recollection of the past cites advertisements as the origin of human emotion and dialogue. His ability to understand human interaction and feeling is via the commercials he is forced to assess, not the other way around. Kasia Boddy likens this manipulation of affect in the workplace to labour that is as equally emotional as it is physical, as many of Saunders' characters are required to perform roles rather than work as their own selves (think of the narrators of "Pastoralia" or "Sea Oak") (Boddy 5). Boddy references the work of sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild,

whose study into the “commercialization of human feeling” asserts that one of the central problems of emotional labour is “emotive dissonance,” which is the struggle to maintain “a difference between feeling and feigning” in the workplace (5). Hochschild’s study details how corporate logic asks employees to take part in a “market for emotional labor” whereby a worker’s “put-on smiles” became “an instrument of feeling” and policed by their supervisors who were akin to “paid stage managers” (Hochschild 119). In this account, the dissonance between real and actual feelings is more precisely achieved and enhanced by the narrator’s point of view.

Notably, “Jon” is a monologue—a trope of much of Saunders’ fiction—which Gilbert Highet asserts is the “first main type of satire” (40), and is complete with a carefully constructed syntax consisting of grammatical errors: “Back in the time of which I am speaking, to our coordinators had mandated use, we had all seen that educational video of *It’s Yours to Do With What You Like!* In which teens like ourselves speak on the healthy benefits of getting off by oneself” (23). Here, Jon’s diction exhibits his lack of self-awareness, and this deficiency becomes almost our own as to read Jon’s first-person narrative is to be stuck inside his emotionally-managed mind, replete with product codes, drug names, advertisements, and a constrained diction. On the contrary, to tell this story in the third-person would certainly inhibit the story’s satirical intent, as our relationship to Jon’s naivety provides the basis for Saunders’ sardonic humour:

At which point every cell of chromosome or whatever it was in my gonads that have been holding their breaths was suddenly like, Dude, slide through that gap no matter how bad it hurts, squat outside Carolyn’s Privacy Tarp whispering, Carolyn, it’s me, please un-Velcro your Privacy opening! (25)

Similarly, in “The Semplica Girl Diaries,” the narrator’s point of view is imperative in rendering the disposition of a person whose attempt at achieving affluence on par with his neighbours is at the forefront of his ambition:

Note to self: Try to extend positive feelings associated with Scratch-Off win into all areas of life. Be bigger presence at work. Race up ladder (joyfully w/smile on face), get raise. Get in best shape of life, start dressing nicer. Learn guitar? Make point of noticing beauty of world? Why not educate self re. birds, flowers, trees, constellations, become true citizen of natural world, walk around neighborhood w/kids, patiently teaching kids names of birds, flowers, etc. etc.? (*Tenth of December* 129)

The story is epistolary, told entirely through the narrator’s journal entries and, interestingly, contains almost no articles—a strict adherence to a realistic syntax within a mode that is heavily self-conscious and introspective. Such narration allows the reader access to a reflective narrator in a medium that exists almost separate to the prose. Adam Kelly believes Saunders’ first-person narration supports, “his New Sincerity aesthetic, allowing him to explore the limits of expressive subjectivity, ethical consciousness, and detached spectatorship under neoliberal conditions” (Kelly 2017: 49). In addition, letters, journal entries, and memos are omnipresent in Saunders’ fiction.<sup>10</sup> “Escape From Spiderhead” does not contain a letter or memo, but Verbaluce™ is used to extract the inner-most thoughts of the characters to better explain the experience of being under the influence of the drug. For Saunders, the first-person narrative is his drug, and it is neatly given to characters—and, by way of point of view and diction, his readers—in order to greatly enhance his ability, as author, to conveniently have

---

<sup>10</sup> *The Very Persistent Gappers of Frip*, “My Amendment,” “The Semplica Girl Diaries,” “I Can Speak!™,” *Lincoln in the Bardo*, “Exhortation,” “Pastoralia,” “The Barber’s Unhappiness” all exhibit these characteristics.



access to inner-selves. The access to such intimate perspectives is imperative for the reader to enable empathetic thinking.

Saunders' ubiquitous use of the first-person is also characteristic of satiric authors. In order to "flaunt their literary personalities," Alvin Kernan states that satirists "manipulate their material in the most obvious fashion" (Kernan 1959: 4). For instance, all seven stories that comprise *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline* are written in the first-person perspective, as are most of his stories in other collections, including the popular "Pastoralia" and "Sea Oak." In the case of "Escape from Spiderhead," the first-person narration positions the reader into the same constricted state as Jeff: locked into a prison-research facility (or narrative) and subjected to emotional manipulation. Like a television gameshow where a contestant is faced with the difficult choice of two either equally attractive or unattractive outcomes, Jeff is forced into making life-changing decisions that directly affect other inmates as the audience watches on; the audience, in this case, is the reader.

This case for Saunders' favour of first-person narratives in his satire is given greater clarity when understanding the narration of his few third-person stories. When not in command of the first-person perspective, Saunders adopts a free-indirect third-person narrative style that, unlike strict third-person narrative, still permits him to reveal his characters' inner thoughts as a backdoor toward constructing narrative empathy. Whilst third-person point of view may potentially be more limiting in its character identification than first-person, by representing multiple viewpoints of different characters through omniscient narration, the possibility of empathetic engagement remains just as effective. Indeed, Keen states: "direct description of a character's emotional state or circumstances by a third-person narrator may produce empathy just as effectively as indirect implication of emotional states through actions and context" (Keen 2006: 218). "Victory Lap," "The Falls," and "Tenth of

December” are of the few stories of Saunders’ told in the third-person, but their narrative is free and indirect, and the consciousnesses of the focal characters are brought to the foreground. In both stories the narrative is notably non-linear and is told from the perspective of each character via an omniscient narrator; each character’s viewpoint is presented interchangeably until the stories’ end.

Saunders has described this technique as “third-person ventriloquis[m],” where he presents what initially appears as a third-person story then quickly tries, “to get into the person’s thoughts, but then with the extra kicker of trying to use (or) restrict myself to his or her diction” (Interview, *NPR*). The outcome of such a restriction is to think in somebody else’s voice, and “sort of become them”—an aspect also seen in his first-person (*NPR*). By revealing the internal alienation of a character, Saunders reminds us of the external and public voices we carry around inside us. In a simpler illustration, Saunders refers to his Catholic upbringing as an influence on his creation of empathy through multiple perspectives:

But I also was raised Catholic, and we did this intense thing called the Stations of the Cross, which maybe some of you did. And this was the 60’s, so we really did it. We did it for five straight days, naked in the desert being flayed. But the thing was, there were these images of the suffering of Christ around the room. And you sat so you looked at each one. So now it was the second station, and there was a little narration from the Bible. And then you were to sit, quietly, and think about it. And we had one nun who was wonderful, because she would say to think about what Jesus was experiencing and so on. And then she’d say to think about what the Roman soldier was experiencing ... So that was early, like Novel Writing 101. (Saunders, “Talks at Google”)

Whilst the generation of empathy is at the core of this statement, there is a great emphasis on point of view. Indeed, in the case of Saunders’ third-person stories, one may consider Saunders the nun, carefully guiding the reader toward specific narrative perspectives in order to increase affective engagement.

With regard to this “third-person ventriloquism,” Robert Cameron Wilson brilliantly analyses such narration through Mikhail Bakhtin’s *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, noting that the fiction of Saunders, “is fiction that is polyphonic, where human consciousness is constructed as dialogic and social, captured in rich microdialogues” (Wilson 222-3). Wilson’s study is focused on “Victory Lap” (*In Persuasion Nation*), a story which is told entirely through the interweaving perspectives of three characters in third person. These third person accounts feature an intimate relationship with the character through internal dialogues. Suzanne Keen states that many theorists and critics have: “singled out a small set of narrative techniques—such as the use of first-person narration and the interior representation of characters’ consciousness and emotional states—as devices supporting character identification, contributing to empathetic experience” (Keen 2006, 213). Saunders uses free indirect style to gain inner access to these wildly different characters in order to enhance the possibility of empathetic experience with his reader by informing them of the experiences of all the story’s characters. In addition, each protagonist has a distinctive voice. “Tenth of December” and “The Falls” similarly adhere to a fragmented short story structure, whereby Saunders uses an omniscient narrator to illuminate the consciousness of multiple characters.

Furthermore, Saunders has been shown to manipulate point of view to coincide with a story’s theme. For instance, in “Winky”—the story of Neil Yaniky who attends a self-help seminar in which the audience are required to chant, “Now Is the Time for Me to Win!”—Saunders adjusts his narrative to mimic popular self-help books which address the reader in the second-person:

Trumpets sounded from a concealed tape deck. An actor in a ripped flannel shirt stumbled across the stage with a sign around his neck that said “You.”

[...]

“I’m Lost!” You cried. “I’m wandering in a sort of wilderness!”

[...]

“Hey, You, come on over!” should a girl across the stage, who was labelled Inner Peace. “I bet you’ve been looking for me your whole life!”

[...]

But then from the wings sprinted a number of other actors, labeled “Whiny,” and “Self-Absorbed” and “Blames Her Fact on Others” and so on...

[...]

Oh, I can’t believe you love Inner Peace more than you love me, You!” said Insecure. “That really hurts.”

[...]

“Frankly, I’ve never been more disappointed in my life,” said Disappointed.

[...]

... “Is there no hope for me?” asked You. “If only someone had made a lifelong study of the roadblock people encounter on their way to Inner Peace! (*Pastoralia* 69-70)

Here, the point of view shifts quickly from third-person to second-person through the voice of a motivational speaker who, for the sake of this technique and the context of the story, is conveniently—and confusingly—titled “You.” Richard Lee skilfully notes that, in the last statement quoted, “Saunders moves from ‘me’ to ‘you’ to ‘someone’—first, second, then third-person pronouns, ending with the indefinite third-person ‘someone’ ” (Lee 2010: 87). Saunders’ implied readers are thus “linked to the collectivity of all indefinite pronouns and propelled back in his character stream-of-reflector consciousness” (87). Accessing the consciousnesses of his characters, regardless of first or third-person point of view, remains the imperative for Saunders, whose intention to elicit empathy from his readers is dependent on this shared experience of narrator and implied reader.

This intent of revealing the emotion and thoughts of characters permits not only greater clarity as to their wants and needs, but requires participation on our part as readers. By entering the world of the character through the immersion and realism of the narration, we act as participants within the story, wherein we are privy to their oft-revealed lack of self-

awareness, and can only seek liberation in the narrative's end, by which time the character has either engaged empathetically in some way or has sought forgiveness, even after death in the form of a ghost. However, in doing so, Saunders restricts a reader's choice. The reliance on first-person as a means to manipulate a reader's emotional tendencies is connected to the issue of authorial voice. By crafting such intimate perspectives through carefully constructed narration, Saunders creates an intimacy between narrator and implied reader, and thus simultaneously increases the chance for empathetic engagement. However, in doing so, Saunders restricts a reader's choice.

### Violence

Observations that Saunders' stories possess a high degree of empathy and moral engagement with his reader are popular in the many reviews of his fiction. However, what some critics have either overlooked, or refused to acknowledge is Saunders' consistently, provocative, dark settings and plots, which may undermine the story's moral endeavours. As aforementioned, James Yeh's interview for *VICE*, for instance, is titled "George Saunders Thinks Empathy Can Still Save Us" (Yeh: 2017). This echoes Bloom and Bloom's earlier remarks that if "we are moved positively by satire ... we return to our senses, moral, intellectual, and aesthetic" (19). Yet, being "moved positively" (19) by Saunders' satire appears to require one to endure a high degree of cruelty and inhumanity. Jurrit Daalder's study of violence in Saunders' fiction, "George Saunders's Literary Darkenflox™," focuses not on Saunders' humorous language, nor his dignified optimism or moral awareness. Rather, Daalder takes aim at the methods Saunders uses in order to morally interrogate such affective responses from his reader: "[It] seems that Saunders's art of cruelty, with its attempts to anticipate and micro-manage the effects of its shock treatment, is far from emancipating" (Daalder 184-5). Indeed, Saunders'

stories often involve a central character stuck in a difficult financial or physical situation, like “Jeff” in the prison of Spiderhead, or our narrator in “Pastoralia”; but, one can justifiably question whether Saunders, too, uses cruelty and point of view to render his reader equally unmovable to the story’s violence. This shock treatment is evident in *Tenth of December* alone, a collection which consists of rape, abduction, violent rage, suicide, and consistent depictions of humans abusing, both physically and mentally, other humans. For Daalder, the acts of cruelty in Saunders’ fiction “all create the impression that Saunders can hardly write a single story without resorting to shock tactics” (175). In fostering a belief in human goodness for the other through empathy, Saunders relies upon an atmosphere of cruelty, of evil pushed to extremes in order to, by contrast, show the capabilities of an ethical good—empathy—similarly pushed to its limits.

In point of fact, “Escape from Spiderhead” does not close out with Jeff’s successful escape from the institution-like prison where he is held. On the contrary, Jeff achieves liberation only through death after self-inducing Darkenfloxx™ and consequently killing himself using the corner of a desk. Saunders, as he often does, continues Jeff’s narration by way of him as a ghost, with the concluding lines:

From across the woods, as if by common accord, birds left their trees and darted upward. I joined them, flew among them, they did not recognize me as something apart from them, and I was happy, so happy, because for the first time in years, and forevermore, I had not killed, and never would. (81)

Adam Kelly states that this ending has been controversial among readers, and thus asks: “Do the final lines signify that Jeff’s death absolves him of the murder that had him committed to the Spiderhead in the first place?” (Kelly 2017: 48). Jeff’s reliability is also questioned at this denouement as, prior to the final act, the reader is unaware of why Jeff is imprisoned in the first place—specifically that “fateful night” often alluded to (58). Despite the fact he is a

convicted murderer, we empathise with Jeff's position since we have invested in his perspective, an engagement enhanced by Saunders' refraining from explaining Jeff's "fateful night" earlier on. Furthermore, as a ghost, Jeff empathises with the other inmates in a voice identical to the perspective-shifting of "Thought Experiment":

Here was Ned Riley, here was B. Troper, here was Gail Orley, Stefan DeWitt, killers all, all bad, I guess, although, in that instant, I saw it differently. At birth, they'd been charged by God with the responsibility of growing into total fuckups. Had they chosen this? Was it their fault, as they tumbled out of the womb? (79)

The sympathy felt for Jeff by the reader is apparent as he is our focalising character (and narrator) in the story, yet he is also a convicted murderer. Thus the earlier reflections of Jeff, that "every human is worthy of love" (69) sees out its resolution as Jeff, a murderer, absolves himself via suicide in order to save Rachel. To advocate empathy for another comes at the cost of a macabre act, that of Camus' "one truly serious philosophical problem"—suicide (Camus 1). However, through the powers of fiction, Saunders permits the afterlife as an actuality, as Jeff's narration is uninterrupted as his body turns to spirit.

This self-reflective consciousness of Saunders' narrators is typical, and, in the case where violence is intensified, it is expected some great act of empathetic concern will follow. Nowhere is this more evident than in the closing paragraph to "CivilWarLand in Bad Decline," in the collection of the same name, where our unnamed narrator—who has killed a child earlier in the story—so eloquently adopts a compassionate voice for Sam, the vigilante who has been hired to protect CivilWarLand (a Civil War re-enactment theme park) from gangs, and who, at the moment of narration, is stabbing our narrator to death:

Possessing perfect knowledge I hover above him as he hacks me to bits. I see his rough childhood. I see his mother doing something horrid to him with a

broomstick. I see the hate in his heart and the people he has yet to kill before pneumonia gets him at eighty-three. I see the dead kid's mom unable to sleep, pounding her fists against her face in grief at the moment I was burying her son's hand. I see that pain I've caused. I see the man I could have been, and the man I was, and then everything is bright and new and keen with love and I sweep through Sam's body, trying to change him, trying so hard, and feeling only hate and hate, solid as stone. (26)

This affective response to the closing scene is described by Ferris as “an almost irrational empathy” but one that is “the source of all humanity” (Ferris xviii). It is also the perspective of an omniscient author, providing a meta-moment for Saunders. Additionally, this passage supports Layne Neeper's claim that Saunders' satire “is not simply the ridicule of targets that results in reform but rather ridicule coupled with enough knowledge of the targeted character's psychological motivations to allow the reader to empathize” (290-1). The reform is not of the physical but psychological—an attempt at establishing an empathetic norm as a response to hardship or tragedy. This epiphanic moment of our downtrodden narrator is clear in its authorial intent to provoke empathy. Certainly, the narrator's ability to access his attacker's mind and subsequently communicate Sam's circumstances (“rough childhood”) removes our narrator's own reflection during his death as entirely selfish, one consisting of his own failures and disappointments. However, by invoking Friedrich Nietzsche's claim that, “[a]lmost everything we call ‘higher culture’ is based on the spiritualization of cruelty,” Daalder asserts that Saunders' stories subject the reader to “cruelties as part of a shock treatment that promises to lead to greater empathy, deeper insight, and a richer interior life—though no one ever quite knows how” (175). This is most evident in “CivilWarLand in Bad Decline”. As our narrator is “hack[ed] to bits,” we are supposedly roused into a state of compassion and empathy, but only through an act of murder in which our narrator conveniently—and rather patronizingly—possesses “perfect knowledge” (26), a god-like omniscience. However, while



Saunders' stories are undoubtedly violent, one must be reminded of the stories' satire, and satire's tendency to distort reality.

This distortion of reality is utilised by satire's hyperbole of its satiric target, not that which is being promoted as morally good. "[T]he satirist views the world pessimistically" writes Alvin Kernan, "and sees little hope for reform unless violent methods are used to bring mankind to its sense" (Kernan 1965: 263). Through his ambitious project of empathy, Saunders almost certainly does not view the world pessimistically. Nevertheless, in hoping for reform, Saunders often uses violence and shock tactics to achieve his affective endeavours. Claire Colebrook writes of this reform-through-violence method with regard to Swift:

The very style of satire—the capacity of human speech for invective, ridicule, disgust, distancing and elevation—is shown in both its positive effects and its risks. On the one hand, satire allows us to view the human condition: Gulliver's travels present him again and again with the follies of human vanity and endeavour ... On the other hand, we also see the violent tendencies of the satirical impulse, the capacity for misanthropy and disgust that ultimately leads Gulliver into abandoning human speech and dialogue altogether (202)

While Saunders' fiction is unlike that of Swift's misanthropy, as earlier examined, the satire of both relies upon an irony that, if not understood, results in an art where violent tendencies run rampant without reason. Indeed, the moral intensity of Saunders' fiction is evident, as are his characters' potential for difficult empathy, but the risk of creating such settings invites violence and pity. "[F]or a story to show joy," says Saunders, "it would have to have some anti-joy in it—something that would normally, in real life, impede joy." (Weinstein 67). This statement by Saunders is, however, not entirely true. Anti-joy can indeed emphasise the goodness of joy, but it is not necessary unless, of course, one views such elevation of light through the satiric mode which, by way of its nature, is heavily dependent on irony and hyperbole in advocating a position.

Furthermore, pathos and “anti-joy” are equally overflowing in “Jon”. Carolyn and Jon are insistent on having a baby, but due to the oppressive management of the facility, this is near impossible. Foreshadowing this is Josh and Ruthie’s baby, Amber, who dies, though we are most certainly sure it is murder carried out by a senior member of the facility. Yet, this is a story which, in spite of the bleak and oppressive world in which it is set, is about love: “I do not want to only speak of my love in grunts!” says Jon, “If I wish to compare my love to a love I have previous knowledge of, I do not want to stand there in the wind casting about for my metaphor!” (*In Persuasion Nation* 30). Carolyn and Jon’s story is a love story, and it is one that is more pronounced given that the environment in which they reside is inimical to love. So too is Jeff’s action in “Spiderhead” concerned with love for another, embodying Constant’s remark in Vonnegut’s *The Sirens of Titan* that, “a purpose of human life, no matter who is controlling it, is to love whoever is around to be loved” (313). But this is precisely the wild contrast Saunders’ fiction adheres to in order to maintain what Basseler calls Saunders’ “aesthetics (and ethics) of compassion” (159). By inversely and ironically stating what is good—in these examples, love and freedom—satire requires the most grotesque depiction of what is evil, “the inverse praise of good things” (Z. Smith). This remains Saunders’ project: to engage the reader with intensely cruel content that forces her to view pro-social, ethically-responsible behaviour through the consciousness of characters forced into making such decisions. In addition, it is worth noting that Saunders appears to exchange his narrative’s reliance on violence in his short fiction for a greater measure of sentimentality in his recently published first novel.

In an article for *Texas Monthly*, Jeff Salmon remarks on the similarity between Saunders’ novel *Lincoln in the Bardo* (2017) and his first collection of short stories *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline*, remarking that in both publications (texts that currently bookend Saunders’ oeuvre), “a ghost of some sort enters someone else’s mind and body and feels an unexpected empathy

for that person” (Salmon 56). Saunders has always been committed to exploring this ability to feel and think with another person through narrative, or best to at least understand and contextualise where one’s insecurities and frustrations come from, as explained in “Thought Experiment.” Indeed, in response to Salmon’s remark, Saunders replies:

If you could inhabit the secret thoughts of your enemy, they wouldn’t be your enemy. You would see their understanding of the world; what they were doing would make perfect sense. When you read a great book you’re lifted out of your consciousness and into someone else’s (Salmon 57-8)

Saunders’ corrective is empathy; it is consciousness-raising. To not only empathise with another but to literally enter their consciousness, or something similar, is at work in *Lincoln in the Bardo*, a novel which borders on being maudlin. Composed of character dialogue and extracts from history books (approximately a quarter of which are Saunders’ own creation), the novel typifies Saunders’ favoured first-person storytelling, free-indirect discourse, unreliable narration, and his fascination with tone and diction by pushing these narrative characteristics even further. Saunders has made light of this dialogue-heavy novel, stating in a short story workshop that: “structure is setting the book up in a way that lets you do what you’re good at” (Saunders, Auckland Writers Festival). The dialogue favours his characters’ preferred state of being as all dialogue is shared by the deceased in the form of ghosts (thus allowing character reflection); but, more interestingly, the ghosts possess the unique ability to enter the bodies of the living. The deceased Willie Lincoln, for example, enters the body of his father, President Abraham Lincoln. In doing so, the ghost is able to access the person’s thoughts, feelings, and ideas—and so too can the reader. Regardless of structure, this element of the story is characteristically Saunders, mimicking the structure of his third-person stories which permit him to “run around to the other side of the idea see what another character sees” (Lee 84), evident in stories such as in “Victory Lap,” and “Tenth of December.”

Whatever techniques Saunders' empathetic satire demands, he is as equally concerned with his characters' inner-selves as he is the readers'—it is this fictional medium that persuades the reader to engage in introspection and perspective-shifting.

In addition, it is of interest that Abraham Lincoln is the one character whose feelings are not transmitted to the reader by dialogue but through other characters via a ghost inhabiting his body. Abraham, the only character who does not speak is, due to the rules of Saunders' surreal imagination, still able to be understood through this manipulation of narrative. Caleb Crain refers to this aspect of the novel as Saunders, "bend[ing] the rules," the result of which is "anti-novelistic" (n.p.). "The fun of novels" writes Crain, "is that people *can't* get in one another's heads except by talking; the impediment multiplies the opportunities to mislead and misunderstand" (n.p.). Cain's criticism is not indicative of the general critical reception of the novel, as *Lincoln in the Bardo* won the Man Booker Prize (2017) for its experimentality and innovation. However, according to Crain, Saunders' move "beyond the stylized violence of his early stories seems to be the transmutation of a portion of his violence into schmaltz" (n.p.). Cain is not alone in this line of criticism.

Peter Byrne, in his review for Saunders' *Tenth of December* (2013), states that "[g]ood satire doesn't weep for its victims" (Byrne n.p.). Examples of this, according to Byrne, are those considered some of the greatest satires: Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal*, Voltaire's *Candide*, Evelyn Waugh's *The Loved Ones*—works considered by Byrne to be grotesque and hilarious and, more importantly for Byrne, do not weep but instead are scathing and unremorseful. Byrne is, like most critics, complimentary of *Tenth of December* collection, and remarks at Saunders' "skill at shaping [his characters] and the perfect pitch of his prose" (n.p.). Yet, in closing out his summary of the collection's stories, he does not refute his opening sentence that quality satire does not sympathise, instead asserting that by stripping Saunders'

stories it: “reveal[s] that satire isn’t his strongest suit. As dark as his palette may be, he can’t altogether escape the gaga optimism of his compatriots” (n.p.). There may very well be a point to Byrne’s annoyance at Saunders appearing “too mushy,” but this is not to say that the satire in Saunders’ work isn’t “good” for its detailed attempts to critique *and* uplift. As evidenced in the previous chapter, Saunders repeatedly attacks America’s “gaga optimism,” and rather than imitating it, replaces such optimism with a hope bound in awareness. Yet, in his closing statement, Byrne cannot withhold his disappointment: “Looking on the bright side is what the Jesus-lovers-and-savers do, likewise the deniers of climate change and the planner of costless invasions and no-problem regime change abroad” (n.p.). In a flurry of closing generalisations, Byrne becomes the person Saunders would, in turn, seek to satirise—the person to invert such generalisations and expose them as frail in world that is diverse and deserving of perspectives that respect complexity.

Whilst Cain and Byrne may be correct, and that the omission of shock tactics results in excessive sentimentality, it is nonetheless evident that the underlying intention of Saunders’ fiction is empathetic through affective engagement, and geared toward a psychological transformation. More importantly, it is an emotional transformation Saunders appears to wholeheartedly believe in. In spite of how his satiric worlds are structured with reference to reality and depressing historical particulars, it appears that Saunders’ project of increasing one’s empathetic capacity outside of the text is sincere, and hopeful.

### Hope

Denouncing the American novelist’s “preoccupation with hopelessness,” Walter Poznar writes that: “Nowhere in the American novel is there the faintest hope that the system can be humanized” (n.p.). Poznar’s reaction is likely one directed against the degenerative satirists

and the black humourists, those who “debas[ed] the human image in the twentieth century [and have] seriously weakened our faith in man” (n.p.). Certainly, it is difficult to not see Saunders’ satire as a cultural response to Poznar’s observation, and thus Saunders as an artist deserving of the classification. Ruben Quintero, for instance, argues that: “[A]ny satirist deserving of the name must be more than a partisan advocate or a clownish entertainer, for a true satirist must be a true believer, a practicing humanitarian” (Quintero 3). One of the more defining aspects of Saunders’ satire that can be understood through his ethics of compassion is, I believe, that Saunders’ fiction possesses a rather considerable degree of hope. In doing so, Saunders’ not only uses narrative empathy as an affective cushion to his satire, but he also, unlike many satirists before him, leaves room for hope, redemption, and transformation. Saunders’ engagement with human emotion is to humanise the Other; it is a moral, optimistic portrayal of humankind’s affective capacity.

By assessing Saunders’ hopeful outlook, one can certainly see a strong differentiation between Saunders’ optimistic satire and that of his fellow satirists. Hope, that which is not imperative in the satirist’s toolbox, most certainly permits strong differentiation between Saunders and fellow satirists. Even in one of Saunders’ darkest stories, there are glimpses of hope, optimism, and faith. Alex Millen, for instance, reads such buoyancy in “Escape from Spiderhead”:

Like George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, love becomes part of the machinery of control, but, unlike Orwell, it has not been corrupted utterly. In this way, dealing as it does in love, “Escape from Spiderhead” is at once one of the most frightening of Saunders’s stories and one of most hopeful: language can be manipulated, freedom can become impossible, but not quite, since the capacity for love still remains. For all its characteristic ambivalence, there is something redemptive, I think, about the way this story ends. (Millen 13)

In reading *Tenth of December*, one may applaud the bleak worlds Saunders creates, but to do so at the expense of Saunders' fascination with human emotion would mean that, in Saunders' words, he has "failed" (Saunders, *The White Review*). This is precisely why the classification of 'satirist' can be so limiting, as it likens Saunders with Orwell but simultaneously excludes Saunders' genuine engagement with human emotion both on and off the page. Steven Wiesenberger observes that degenerative satire "turns on feelings of antipathy ... and abject horror. It may not, even in its classical texts (like *Gulliver's Travels*), locate any paved roads back to normality" (143). In contrast, Saunders' post-postmodern satire reaffirms the possibility of every person's worth in order to retain hope that, despite the pressures of late capitalism, it is not foolish to have faith in humanity.

Moreover, Gillian Elizabeth Moore goes a little further in her reading of Saunders' resistance against "nationalist exceptionalist rhetoric" in his stories, suggesting that: "Saunders' fiction is concerned with reworking seemingly pre-postmodern concepts of hope, epiphany, and transformation conventionally associated with the short story" (Moore 59; 60). It is important to note, however, that hope is not the same as cheerful expectation. When one thinks of hope, they do so in circumstances where the possibility of a favourable outcome is not likely. Thus, the satirist is accordingly a critic who is simultaneously displeased with the current situation but still has hope—such is the existence of their satirical protest. Unlike Saunders' Puritan characters who embody the belief that success and happiness can be achieved through hard work or a change of mind, even against all odds, the satirist possesses an awareness of life's painful realities and the difficulties within. One may both possess ambivalence about the possibility of reform and also proclaim hope that their ambivalence will be positively alleviated in time. In spite of their satiric similarities, Saunders' production of affect in his fiction is less of the resigned despair of Vonnegut and more akin to Emily Dickinson's hope "[t]hat perches in the soul" (116). Indeed, "'Hope'" is the thing with

feathers,” wrote Dickinson, comparing hope to a bird that, no matter the extremes (“in the chilliest land— / And on the strangest Sea—”) still sings the song of hope eternally, never once asking for anything (116). For Saunders, every person should acknowledge the possibility of hope coupled with awareness, as does Jeff in “Spiderhead” who joins birds who have left their trees and flies with them (*Tenth of December* 81). Not that which exists apart from knowledge and empathy, nor the individualised self-improvement, but that which hopes for all humankind, even against difficulties that chip away at the possibility of transformation.

Granted, it is perhaps bad faith to conduct a simplistic account of an author’s outlook through a mixture of their fiction and interviews, but Vonnegut’s ambivalence and diffused pessimism in his fiction stands in stark contrast to the satire of Saunders’. Notwithstanding the problem of confusing Vonnegut’s fictional voice with that of his own, the sense of reformation’s success in his satire is poles apart from Jon and Carolyn’s escape in “Jon,” or the successful resistance of the young Eva in “The Semplica Girl Diaries”. Indeed, Donald Morse equates Vonnegut’s “belief in progress” (95) with C. P. Snow’s reformulation of thermodynamics: “You cannot win. You cannot break even. You cannot get out of the game” (102). As a guest on a talk show in *Hocus Pocus*, says, when speaking about Earth: “We could have saved it, but we were too doggone cheap” (143). However, Vonnegut is by no means a total pessimist nor a complete cynic. Jay McInerney’s review of Vonnegut’s *Hocus Pocus* as, “a satirist with a heart, a moralist with a whoopee cushion, a cynic who wants to believe,” is perhaps a more apt account of describing how Vonnegut never quite devotes himself to either cynicism or optimism, rather adopting a careful pessimism (McInerney, 1990). Moreover, as Kathryn Hume contends, Vonnegut’s “odd mixture of optimism and pessimism” has “caused reviewers considerable discomfort” as Vonnegut’s “symbolic situations reveal no satisfying outcomes ... [unable] to gratify the expectations of optimism” (Hume 445). Hume reasons this is due to personal experience, that all possibilities of hopeful transformation were



“blocked” (437) as “Dresden destroyed them” (438). Vonnegut’s exploration of life’s meaning contributes to this tension, and thus attests to a fiction like that of cosmic satire, which Tilton states, “finds man’s ailment incurable” (Tilton 19).

Furthermore, Vonnegut has openly expressed his cynicism. Consider the following conversation Vonnegut has with Harry Reasoner in 1969:

Reasoner: You come out of all of this, I would guess, calling yourself a pessimist.

Would you accept that label?

Vonnegut: Well, things do seem to get worse.

Reasoner: Would it be fair to say you see not hope for the world and mankind?

Vonnegut: Yeah, I see some, as I can see maybe forty years’ more hope. And I can see help for people like myself who can retreat. (Vonnegut 1988: 17)

Vonnegut, interestingly, does not completely reject Reasoner’s questions about his pessimism and despair, in fact, he rather passively accepts the label. For himself, there is hope, but such hope comes with an expiry date.

Indeed, Vonnegut, though undoubtedly a humanist, is less concerned with how one can transform society’s ills, but rather with how to take life’s tragedy. Vonnegut seeks a comic response to tragic fact but rather than edge closer toward moral correction, cynicism paralyses the chance for humanity’s redemption. Saunders’ compassionate satire borrows much of the humanist and surreal elements of Vonnegut, but it uses such elements toward hopeful ends—through a dignified optimism. Vonnegut, on the other hand, sees humankind as beyond repair and thus represents a fatalistic account to the human condition. Where there is protest in Vonnegut’s fiction, it notably does not succeed, rather it falls back on itself to not only disable progress but affirm the impossibility of it. Conrad Festa, who argues that “satire is not possible without the implicit moral norm and without the hope of reforming aberrant behavior,” believes that Vonnegut’s fiction “does not offer a great deal of hope” (Festa 136). “Even when

reform does happen in his novels,” he writes, “it is soon corrupted” (137). Where Saunders’ unbearably miserable settings in his stories are offset by his dark, dry humour and a comical abstraction from the real—as is the way with satire—there are always moments of well-measured pathos, such as in “Sea Oak” or “The 400-Pound CEO” (*CivilWarLand*). This sadness, however, is unlike the pity invoked in Vonnegut’s satire, which arguably is more akin to helplessness and despair. For Saunders, humour and pathos alone are not viable; awareness and hope are essential. Like the famous refrain of *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) that is repeated with every death that is recorded—“So it goes”—Vonnegut’s critique of society demands awareness and arouses condemnation, but does so with a growing weariness that things will get better: fatalism and passive acceptance of humanity’s evils result in a language of endurance rather than of sincere hope—the latter is a satirical position which seems uniquely Saunders’ in the current era.

Furthermore, Saunders’ satiric critique is not necessarily threatened by his distinctive use of affect, but rather suffused by it, eventuating into a scenario where the reader responds to a call for awareness of vice and folly and simultaneously comforted by such harsh truths. Thus, if we regard narrative empathy as an integral and distinctive aspect of Saunders’ identifiable satire, then the intended outcome of his satire stands in contrast to many satires before him. Alvin Kernan, in evaluating the progression of a satire’s plot, asserts that, “the most striking quality of satire is the absence of plot” (Kernan 270). “We seem at the conclusion of satire,” he writes, “to be always at very nearly the same point where we began” (270). This is not necessarily the case in Saunders’ fiction. Even though the settings of his stories usually remain unchanged, there is an identifiable plot that enables his character progression, such as in “The Semplica Girl Diaries” and “Tenth of December”. Further, there is a clear sense of empathetic concern in Saunders’ fiction that compassion can be learnt through fiction, even satire. Whereas Kernan states that the absence of plot in satire results in the satirist and his

target being “locked in the respective attitudes without any possibility of either dialectal movement or the simple triumph of good over evil,” Saunders instead attempts to promote the triumph of perspective and compassion rather than a simple triumph of evil (271). Sarah Pogell, for example, writes that “Saunders still has hope for this country, the world and the human race” (478), something that Saunders would attest to. Furthermore, upon hearing of a friend’s concerns for Saunders’ wellbeing after reading *CivilWarLand*, Saunders notes: “I’m happy. I’m one of the happiest people I know. My book is not happy. My book is funny. My book tells, uh, dark truths. I’m a hopeful person. Writing this book was a happy, hopeful act” (*CivilWarLand* 195).

Despite accusations that Saunders’ fiction may be read as too contrived and sentimental, Juliana Nalerio states that: “[Saunders]’ desire to address real world problems demonstrates an optimism the majority of postmodern writers and theorists may not share with him, but which may be exactly what Literature with a capital “L” needs” (Nalerio 97). Empathy in the visceral storytelling that Saunders so masterfully writes is a critical component to his undoubted sense of belief in empathy as a step toward social responsibility, and the hope that things will get better. The English critic F. L. Lucas, who Poznar so appropriately quotes at the end of his essay, warns that, “mentally, as physically, [people] need both light and warmth. Light without warmth can become as melancholy and sterile as moonlight on a cemetery; warmth without light can become very like Hell” (Lucas 127). When Saunders renders a theme park as Hell, he does so with a degree of optimism that still hints at an escape from darkness to light. Indeed, although not speaking of satire, Saunders explains this intent:

You can choose what you write but you can’t choose what you make live. The first job is to make it jangly with energy. And in my case that often takes a little cruelty, a little dark humour ... My hope is that with all that distortion, there's

still some kind of light that comes through. And it's the only way I can get the light to come through. (Clark n.p.)

Just as Millen reads “Escape from Spiderhead” as redemptive, one may also read “Pastoralia” as similarly possessing a degree of light. Not far from the theme park where our caveman narrator resides, there is Marty and his son, who operate an “Employees Only shop” not accessible by guests (11). As the narrator disposes of his waste, he overhears Marty indirectly discussing the importance of kindness as his son, who attends an expensive private school, explains how the kids there are nice to him: “When I missed at long division they were nice. When I ate with my fingers they were nice. When my shoes split in gym they were nice. This one kid gave me his shoes” (38). However, the boy mistakenly believes that their kindness was learnt at a specific camp, a “being-nice camp” or a “giving-shoes-camp,” instead of practicing kindness for the sake of being kind, as Saunders endeavours to preach. Thus, in the mere three segments of the story that feature Marty and his family—all of which are not integral to plot—we learn from Marty that: “[Y]ou don’t have to be rich to be nice. You just have to be nice” (39).

The theme of kindness with no expectation of something in return permeates the story as the narrator struggles to complain about Janet’s poor work ethic. In a short paragraph, he reflects how his father, who worked at a butchery, never complained about his co-worker, Fred Lank, who “had a metal plate in his skull” and would often fail to adequately do his job (45). Instead, his father would compensate for Lank’s mistakes by doing twice as much work for days at a time. Subsequently, when his dad died, “Lank sent Mom a check for a thousand dollars, with a note: *Please keep, it said. The man did so much for me*” (46). This self-reflection mirrors the difficulties of Janet and her relationship with her son. Such passages give warmth to a dystopian tale in a manner that is further clarified in *Lincoln in the Bardo*, specifically in Hans Vollman’s description of Lincoln’s disposition:

His mind was freshly inclined toward sorrow; toward the fact that the world was full of sorrow; that everyone labored under some burden of sorrow; that all were suffering; that whatever way one took in this world, one must try to remember that all were suffering (none content; all wronged, neglected, overlooked, misunderstood), and therefore one must do what one could to lighten the load of those with whom one came into contact... (Saunders 303)

Herein lies Saunders' capacity for hope and that moralism that so penetrates the satirist's voice. Through narrative empathy, and by viewing each other "as suffering, limited beings" (303), we thus seek to understand and assist those in worse conditions than our own. In spite of everything, Saunders' believes in this ethic of reciprocity, a form of the Golden Rule that is subtly suffused within his satiric fiction.

Saunders, I argue, is an optimist concerned about optimism and its place in human progress. His consistent criticism of the Puritan work ethic, entwined with the self-destructive power of positive thinking under late capitalism, insists that Saunders is worried about an American ethos that is too easily manipulated by cynical corporate voices. Throughout his stories, Saunders playfully mocks the capitalist settings his characters suffer under, particularly how the Law of Attraction preached by Quimby and Oprah—"thinking positive / saying positive"—will supposedly remedy all maladies. Kasia Boddy notes that, for Saunders, the problem with self-help is, "in its fetishism of 'exertion of the will' and 'decision,' and concomitant denial of factors outside of the self," all of which result "in a denial of [...] tolerance and kindness" (Boddy 8). Saunders thus embarks upon affective territory which exists beyond the page, with characters who, with little need to, think outside of their selves and attempt to understand one another. This in itself may be seen as wildly optimistic (for many characters such empathy transpires after death) and is precisely what Richard Lee briefly alludes to in his reading of Saunders' narrative techniques:

Most important, however, is something that his scathing wit leaves submerged within his fiction: Saunders is an idealist, an optimist. He values those who struggled against the immensity of the cosmos; he underscores the poignancy and ephemerality of life even as he castigates pretensions and human folly (Lee, 2010: 276).

Although Saunders' cruel, violent worlds may make one feel uncomfortable, they are rationalised through his agenda of "err[ing] in the direction of kindness" (Saunders, *Congratulations*). In fact, as Lee notes, Saunders rewards those who do so against almost incomprehensible struggle. In this twistedly dark (albeit idealist) fiction, everyone is capable of such kindness, as is suggested by the name of a young girl in *Frip*.

Of a generation of writers for whom cynicism toward humankind may be more welcome, Saunders goes against the grain of misanthropy, instead opting for an ethics of compassion and empathy, of seeing others as noble with a moralism that invites discussion of an ethical good in his satire. He is, by all accounts, an optimist, but not a traditional American one in the manner of Quimby or Oprah. His is an optimism not of material prosperity for oneself, but of collective hope, of a dignified positive sensibility that acts in conjunction with empathy and, above all else, humility. As the narrator of "The 400-Pound CEO" asks: "[W]hat's there to do but behave with dignity?" (*CivilWarLand* 64). Fernanda Moore, in her piece describing Saunders as an "Anti-Minimalist" focuses on Saunders' distinctive working-class characters and their outcome, stating that: "[I]n the end, thanks to Saunders's generous storylines, his underdogs manage to triumph over hardship, to find grace and transcendence, and even to prevail" (Moore 51). But this is not necessarily true. A victory in a Saunders story is not so much the triumph over hardship, and by no means is it successful revolution against a system that restricts subjectivity; rather it is a victory in awareness of their respective hardships. The satire of his working-class heroes does indeed possess a mixture of absurd destitution and redemption but this is typically cognitive, not material. In many ways, this is a

replacement of America's positive thinking with a Saunders Aspirin—a form of clarity with moral dignity made possible through an empathetic engagement with someone else. In Saunders' fiction there is a clear distinction between the aggressor and the satiric target, but neither party is ever solely the victim of satiric anger. Rather, there is a dignified sense of a plausible and attractive value in all of humankind. Indeed, for Saunders, empathy is not only the guiding moralism of concern for the other in his satiric stories, it is also the fundamental corrective that proposes an act of change, even if such change is not concerned with policy but with human consciousness.

## Conclusion

George Saunders uses the short story, and satire in general, not solely for criticism or for cynical, metafictional games, but as a way to search for meaning, truth, and morality in the new millennium, at a time many consider to be the end of postmodernism. While many artistic forms may generally be a way to provide a sense of escapism, it is clear that through his distinctive, morally-charged satire, Saunders does not wholly permit this sense of recreational enjoyment to his reader. Rather, by seeking a strong emotional engagement with his reader, Saunders views his satire as having a profound impact in the real world. Instead of providing an escape through humour alone, Saunders' creative, satirical criticism uses irony to elicit empathy. In doing so, Saunders' readers are forced to confront the ills of society that his satire lays bare, also leaving open the possibility of perhaps confronting their own problems in the process—triggering an affective or cognitive transformation.

Saunders is a generative satirist, working at the end of a degenerative satirical landscape, who, with the intent of founding something new after postmodernism, has sought to re-work a traditional understanding of satire that differs from both traditional and twentieth-century definitions of the term. As explored in Chapter One, Saunders' satire is expressive of major components of traditional satire; however, his work uses satire not as an unrelenting or passive critique, but as a means to emotionally connect with his reader. Beyond his stories' satiric targets, Saunders has his style tuned not only to that of critique, humour, and irony, but also to affect with moral norms. Secondly, Saunders, despite the influence of forebears such as Vonnegut and Pynchon, does not continue on from what Wiesenberger understood as 'degenerative' satire. Instead, Saunders re-works many of the predominant styles of black humour and deconstruction, for example, in order to direct satire towards something corrective—something degenerative satirists stopped short of. If Wiesenberger can



argue that satire was still popular during postmodernism in the twentieth century—albeit misunderstood due to archaic satire theory—then one can most certainly say that Saunders’ satire is most definitely responding to postmodernism (and thus also degenerative satire) by moving beyond its previous incarnations to provide something new.

Frye, Kernan, and Mack, all upheld the traditional model of satire as earlier interpreted by Dryden, and thus understood satire to require moral norms and the satirist to view the world pessimistically. Saunders, however, borrows the moral norms from traditional satire, and takes the black humour from the twentieth-century satirists, and re-works a form in the twenty-first century which consists of satire’s more common techniques. Regardless of how much the composition of Saunders’ satire differs from Juvenal, Pope, or Swift—those whom writers regard as creating the long-held definition of satire which Northrop Frye and Worcester continued to uphold—Saunders’ satire is unique in how it stands apart from the postmodern satire understood to be aligned with fiction of a generation of writers he is supposedly a part of. Importantly, Saunders’ stories do not transcend irony, or go beyond its usual characteristics in attempting to respond directly to earlier postmodern fiction. Certainly, irony is not absent in these stories either. Rather, Saunders’ use of satire requires irony, but utilises it without using it as a cultural norm or the default position to critique the world. Indeed, Saunders adopts irony within a traditional mode of satire by restoring it to its use within satire, thus making it a component of something larger rather than the text’s primary aesthetic. In this manner, irony—albeit still open to misinterpretation, as is the paradoxical nature of satire—retains its power for subversion amidst a number of other satirical techniques which have each been appropriated toward satire’s cause. While it is clear that Saunders’ fiction does not appropriately sit with descriptions of ironic cynicism or nihilism, like that of his postmodern forebears, he is in no way committed to its opposite, that of naïve optimism. Saunders’ satire does not direct his criticism solely at language, but at human

tendencies that have been shaped by sociocultural factors, such as the legacy of positive thinking and neoliberalism.

In Chapter Two, I contend that Saunders' most consistent satiric targets are positive thinking and the negative effects of neoliberalism on the human self. Unlike the focus of degenerative satirists during postmodernism, these satiric targets are topical, pertain to the real world, and are deeply rooted in history. In this sense, I argue that the components of Saunders' satire are more akin to the etymological roots the term, *lanx satura*, a mixture of varying ingredients each appropriated for satire's purpose to criticise and reform. Indeed, as I explore in Chapter Three, Saunders' satire possesses many of satire's popular components, but underlying his satire is a strong sense of optimism.

However, there are also limitations to Saunders' affective, hopeful satire. While my emphasis was more on his satire and his intended results, one may certainly argue that this strand of Saunders' satire—his reliance on affect—reinforces the idea of neoliberal growth rather than provide a solution to it. As noted in "Pastoralia" and "Exhortation", Saunders satirises corporate and managerial speak, that which is depicted by Saunders to be evasive, manipulative, and controlling. However, in satirising emotion, Saunders wanders into the same territory as one would if they were to also regulate someone else's emotion. "Escape from Spiderhead" exemplifies Saunders' authority over his fiction and his intended results of his satire. Saunders satirises affect but appears to only offer his own emotional corrective in response. This is perhaps a topic worthy of further exploration, as it raises questions over Saunders use of neoliberal politics toward affective ends. Furthermore, while I contend in Chapter Three that Saunders' satire is hopeful, there is also an argument to be made against this idea. Indeed, Saunders appears to sincerely believe in the possibility of fiction to positively transform his reader, but he may only have hope in the psychological component of this

transformation, instead forsaking improvement in the real world altogether. As he states in his own words: “There’s something sacred about reading a book like *Slaughterhouse-Five*, even if nothing changes but what’s going on inside our minds” (*Braindead Megaphone* 83). Saunders’ hope in the material world is further complicated by the fact that the majority of his characters only reach an epiphanic state or are transformed after death, when their physical body is no longer serviceable or required.

### Works Cited

- "20 under 40." *The New Yorker*, 2010, pp. 49-51.
- "The Future of American Fiction." *The New Yorker*, 1999, pp. 67-70.
- Abrams, M. H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 7 edition, Earl McPeck, 1999.
- Avsar, Rohjat. "“Financialization” of Public Discourse: The Case of Aig." *On the Horizon*, vol. 22, no. 4, 2014, pp. 239-244, doi:10.1108/OTH-07-2014-0023.
- Bahr, David. "George Saunders: Oppressing the Comfortable." *Publishers Weekly*, 2000, <http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/authors/interviews/article/32042-pw-george-saunders-oppressing-the-comfortable.html>.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. edited by Caryl Emerson, translated by Caryl Emerson, University of Minneapolis, 1984.
- Bald, Robert Cecil. "Aldous Huxley as a Borrower " *Aldous Huxley*, edited by Harold Bloom, Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2010, pp. 4-10.
- Baldick, Chris. *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Barnett, Clive. "The Consolations of 'Neoliberalism'." *Geoforum*, vol. 36, no. 1, 2005, pp. 7-12.
- Basseler, Michael. "Narrative Empathy in George Saunders's Short Fiction." *George Saunders: Critical Essays*, edited by Philip Coleman and Steve Gronert Ellerhoff, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, pp. 153-172. *American Literature Readings in the 21st Century*.
- Baudet, Henri. *Paradise on Earth: Some Thoughts on European Images of Non-European Man*. Praeger, 1965.
- Bercovitch, Sacvan. "Rhetoric as Authority: Puritanism, the Bible, and the Myth of America." *Social Science Information*, vol. 21, 1982, pp. 5-6.
- Bierce, Ambrose. *The Devil's Dictionary*. The World Publishing Company, 1948.

- Bloom, Edward A. and Lillian D. Bloom. *Satire's Persuasive Voice*. Cornell University Press, 1979.
- Boddy, Kasia. "'A Job to Do': George Saunders on, and at, Work." *George Saunders: Critical Essays*, edited by Philip Coleman and Steve Gronert Ellerhoff, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, pp. 1-22. *American Literature Readings in the 21st Century*.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. "The Essence of Neoliberalism." *Le Monde diplomatique*, 1998.
- Brooker, Charlie. "Charlie Brooker on Black Mirror, Satire and Politicians - Bbc Newsnight." Interview by Evan Davis, BBC Newsnight, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m45wLFQ6t7Q&index=4&list=WL&t=1s>.
- Brown, Wendy. "Neo-Liberalism and the End of Democracy." *Theory & Event*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2003.
- Burn, Stephen J. *Jonathan Franzen at the End of Postmodernism*. Continuum, 2008. *Continuum Literary Studies Series*.
- Byrne, Peter. "George Saunders's Satire for Soft Hearts." *Swans Commentary*, 2013, <http://www.swans.com/library/art19/pbyrne210.html>.
- Caldwell, Wilber W.. *American Narcissism: The Myth of National Superiority*. Algora Publishing 2006.
- Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus*. translated by Justin O'Brien, Penguin Books, 2005.
- Carlin, George. "Complaints and Grievances." 2001, <https://scrapsfromtheloft.com/2017/03/29/george-carlin-complaints-grievances/>.
- . "Doin' It Again." 1990, <https://scrapsfromtheloft.com/2017/06/27/george-carlin-doin-1990-transcript/>.
- Carnegie, Dale. *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. Angus & Robertson, 1981.
- Chomsky, Noam. *Profit over People: Neoliberalism and Global Order*. Seven Stories Press, 1999.
- Clark, Alex. "George Saunders: 'The Things We Felt About American Culture Couldn't Be

- Reached by Simple Realism. It Had to Be a Little Nutty'." 2014,  
<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/mar/13/george-saunders-folio-prize-winner-interview>.
- Colebrook, Claire. *Irony*. Routledge, 2004.
- Collins, Jane L. "The Age of Wal-Mart." *The Insecure American : How We Got Here and What We Should Do About It*, edited by Hugh Gusterson and Catherine Besteman, University of California Press, 2009, pp. 97-112.
- Connell, Liam. *Precarious Labour and the Contemporary Novel*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.
- Coplan, Amy. "Empathic Engagement with Narrative Fictions." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 62, no. 2, 2004, pp. 141-152, doi:10.1111/j.1540-594X.2004.00147.x.
- Cowart, David. "Prolonged Periodization: American Fiction after 1960." *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern American Fiction*, edited by Paula Geyh, Cambridge University Press, 2017, pp. 28-46.
- Crain, Caleb. "The Sentimental Sadist." *The Atlantic*, no. March 2017, 2017,  
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/03/the-sentimental-sadist/513824/>.
- Daalder, Jurrit. "Cruel Inventions: George Saunders's Literary Darkenflox™." *George Saunders: Critical Essays*, edited by Philip Coleman and Steve Gronert Ellerhoff, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, pp. 173-188. *American Literature Readings in the 21st Century*.
- Dickinson, Emily. *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*. edited by Thomas H. Johnson, Little Brown and Company, 1960.
- Dix, Andrew et al. *The Contemporary American Novel in Context*. Continuum 2011.
- Dryden, John. "Absalom and Achitophel." *Dryden: A Selection*, edited by John Conaghan, Methven & Co Ltd., 1978, pp. 91-94.

- Dunne, Finlay Peter. *Observations by Mr. Dooley*. CreateSpace, 2015.
- Ehrenreich, Barbara. *Bright-Sided: How Positive Thinking Is Undermining America*. Metropolitan Books, 2009.
- Eisenberg, Nancy. "Empathy-Related Responding and Prosocial Behaviour." *Empathy and Fairness*, John Wiley, 2007, pp. 71-88.
- Elkin, P. K. *The Augustan Defence of Satire* Oxford University Press, 1973.
- . *Satire*. 1974.
- Ellenberger, Henri F. *The Discovery of the Unconscious: The History and Evolution of Dynamic Psychiatry* Fontana Press, 1970.
- Elliott, Robert C. *The Power of Satire: Magic, Brutal, Art*. Princeton University Press, 1960.
- Elton, G. R. "Contentment and Discontent." *Early Maryland in a Wider World*, edited by David B. Quinn, Wayne State University Press, 1982.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "The American Scholar." *Selected Essays*, edited by Larzer Ziff, Penguin, 1982, pp. 83-105.
- Feinberg, Leonard. *Introduction to Satire*. Iowa State University Press, 1967.
- . *The Satirist: His Temperament, Motivation, and Influence*. Iowa State University Press, 1963.
- Ferris, Joshua. "Introduction." *Civilwarland in Bad Decline*, Random House, 2016.
- Festa, Conrad. "Vonnegut's Satire." *Vonnegut in America: An Introduction to the Life and Work of Kurt Vonnegut*, edited by Jerome Klinkowitz and Donald D. Lawler, Dell, 1977, pp. 133-149.
- Fletcher, M. D. *Contemporary Political Satire: Narrative Strategies in the Post-Modern Context*. University Press of America, 1987.
- Fowler, H. W. *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*. 2 edition, Oxford University Press, 1965.
- Franzen, Jonathan and Donald Antrim. "Jonathan Franzen." *Bomb*, 2001, pp. 72-78.
- Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism*. Princeton University Press, 1990.

- . "The Nature of Satire." *University of Toronto Quarterly*, vol. 14, no. 1, 1944, pp. 75-89.
- Gallagher, Shaun. "Empathy, Simulation, and Narrative." *Science in context*, vol. 25, no. 3, 2012, pp. 355-381.
- Geyh, Paula. "Introduction." *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern American Fiction*, edited by Paula Geyh, Cambridge University Press, 2017, pp. 1-8.
- Gitlin, Todd. "Postmodernism: Roots and Politics." *Dissent Magazine*, 1989, pp. 100-108.
- Graeber, David. "Neoliberalism, or the Bureaucratization of the World." *The Insecure American: How We Got Here and What We Should Do About It*, edited by Hugh Gusterson and Catherine Besteman, University of California Press, 2009, pp. 79-86.
- Greene, Jack P. *The Intellectual Construction of America: Exceptionalism and Identity from 1492 to 1800*. The University of North Carolina Press, 1993.
- . *Pursuits of Happiness: The Social Development of Early Modern British Colonies and the Formation of American Culture*. The University of North Carolina Press, 1988.
- Greenhouse, Steven. "Workers Assail Night Lock-Ins by Wal-Mart." *The New York Times Magazine*, 2004, <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/01/18/us/workers-assail-night-lock-ins-by-wal-mart.html>.
- Griffin, Dustin H. *Satire: A Critical Reintroduction*. University Press of Kentucky, 1994.
- Guilhamet, Leon. *Satire and the Transformation of the Genre*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987.
- Gusterson, Hugh and Catherine Besteman. *The Insecure American: How We Got Here and What We Should Do About It*. University of California Press, 2009.
- Hammond, Meghan Marie and Sue J. Kim. "Introduction." *Rethinking Empathy through Literature*, edited by Meghan Marie Hammond and Sue J. Kim, Routledge, 2014, pp. 1-20.
- Harris, Charles B. *Contemporary American Novelists of the Absurd*. College and University Press,



1971.

Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford University Press, 2005.

Hawkins, John C. "Life inside the Spectacle: David Foster Wallace, George Saunders, and Storytelling in the Age of Entertainment." *English*, vol. Master of Arts, Liberty University, 1 April 2013.

<https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/><https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/>.

Hayes-Brady, Clare. "Horning In: Language, Subordination and Freedom in the Short Fiction of George Saunders." *George Saunders: Critical Essays*, edited by Philip Coleman and Steve Gronert Ellerhoff, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, pp. 23-40. *American Literature Readings in the 21st Century*.

Hazlitt, William. *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, edited by John Morreall, State University of New York Press, 1987, *Suny Series in Philosophy*, John Morreall.

Hendrickson, G. L. "Satura Tota Nostra Est." *Satire: Modern Essays in Criticism* edited by Ronald Paulson, Prentice-Hall, 1971, pp. 37-51.

Hicks, Stephen R. C. *Explaining Postmodernism: Skepticism and Socialism from Rousseau to Foucault*. Expanded Edition edition, Ockham's Razor Publishing, 2018.

Higget, Gilbert. *The Anatomy of Satire*. Princeton University Press, 1962.

Hochschild, Arlie Russell. *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Feeling*. University of California Press, 2003.

Hodgart, Matthew. *Satire: Origins and Principles*. Transaction Publishers, 2010.

Huebert, David. "Biopolitical Dystopias, Bureaucratic Carnivores, Synthetic Primitives: "Pastoralia" as Human Zoo." *George Saunders: Critical Essays*, edited by Philip Coleman and Steve Gronert Ellerhoff, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, pp. 105-120. *American Literature Readings in the 21st Century*.

Huehls, Mitchum and Rachel Greenwald Smith. "Four Phases of Neoliberalism and

- Literature: An Introduction." *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture*, John Hopkins University Press, 2017, pp. 1-20. Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith.
- Hume, Kathryn. "Kurt Vonnegut and the Myths and Symbols of Meaning." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, vol. 24, no. 4, 1982, pp. 429-447.
- Jameson, Frederic. *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Duke University Press, 1991.
- Janik, Erika. "Think Positive." *American History*, vol. 49, no. 1, 2014, pp. 50-57.
- Juvenal. *Juvenal: The Sixteen Satires*. translated by Peter Green, Penguin Books, 2004.
- Kakutani, Michiko. "Books of the Times; the Losses, Delusions and Terrors of the Lonely." *The New York Times*, 1996, <https://www.nytimes.com/1996/02/02/books/books-of-the-times-the-losses-delusions-and-terrors-of-the-lonely.html>.
- Keen, Suzanne. "A Theory of Narrative Empathy." *Narrative*, vol. 14, no. 3, 2006, pp. 207-236.
- Kelly, Adam. "Language between Lyricism and Corporatism: George Saunders's New Sincerity." *George Saunders: Critical Essays*, edited by Philip Coleman and Steve Gronert Ellerhoff, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, pp. 41-58. *American Literature Readings in the 21st Century*.
- . "Postmodern/Postwar—and After: Rethinking American Literature." *Postmodern/Postwar—and After: Rethinking American Literature*, edited by Jason Gladstone et al., University of Iowa Press, 2016, *The New American Canon: The Iowa Series in Contemporary Literature and Culture*.
- Kernan, Alvin. *The Cankered Muse: Satire of the English Renaissance*. Yale University Press, 1959.
- . *The Plot of Satire*. Yale University Press, 1965.
- Lee, Richard. "Narrative Point of View, Irony and Cultural Criticism in Selected Short

- Fiction by George Saunders." *Short Story*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2010, pp. 81-94.
- Lee, Richard E. "Hanging by a Thread in the Homeland: The *Four Institutional Monologues* of George Saunders." *George Saunders: Critical Essays*, edited by Philip Coleman and Steve Gronert Ellerhoff, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, pp. 77-104. *American Literature Readings in the 21st Century*.
- Lee, Stewart. "Satire." *Stewart Lee's Comedy Vehicle*, edited by Tim Kirkby and Stewart Lee, DVD, Awkward Films, 2014. general editor, Richard Webb.
- Lever, Susan. "Postmodernism, History and Satire: David Foster and Salman Rushdie." *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature*, 1996, pp. 214-220.
- Lindvall, Terry. *God Mocks: A History of Religious Satire from the Hebrew Prophets to Stephen Colbert*. New York University Press, 2015.
- Lipset, Seymour Martin. *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword*. W. W. Norton & Company, 1996.
- Lovell, Joel. "George Saunders Has Written the Best Book You'll Read This Year." *The New York Times Magazine*, 2013,  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/06/magazine/george-saunders-just-wrote-the-best-book-youll-read-this-year.html>.
- Lucas, F. L. *The Art of Living: Four Eighteenth-Century Minds*. The Macmillan Co., 1959.
- Mack, Maynard. "The Muse of Satire." *Satire: Modern Essays in Criticism*, Prentice-Hall, 1971.
- Matthews, Graham. *Ethics and Desire in the Wake of Postmodernism*. Continuum, 2012.  
*Continuum Literary Studies*.
- McCaffery, Larry and David Foster Wallace. "An Interview with David Foster Wallace." *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 13, no. 2, 1993, pp. 127-150.
- McChesney, Robert. "Introduction." *Profit over People: Neoliberalism and Global Order*, Seven Stories Press, 1999, pp. 7-18.

- McHale, Brian. "What Was Postmodernism?" *Electronic Book Review*, 2007,  
<http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/fictionspresent/tense>.
- McInerney, Jay. "Still Asking the Embarrassing Questions." *The New York Times*, 1990,  
<http://movies2.nytimes.com/books/97/09/28/lifetimes/vonnegut-hocuspocus.html>.
- McLaughlin, Robert L. "Post-Postmodern Discontent: Contemporary Fiction and the Social World." *symbloke*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2004, pp. 53-68.
- Meredith, George. "An Essay on Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Sprit." *Comedy*, edited by Wylie Sypher, Doubleday Anchor Books, 1956.
- Millen, Alex. "Affective Fictions: George Saunders and the Wonderful-Sounding Words of Neoliberalism." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 59, no. 2, 2017, pp. 127-141.
- Miller, Laura. "'Tenth of December': Bard of the Wage Slaves." *Salon*, 2013.
- Miller, Perry. *Errand into the Wilderness*. Harvard University Press, 1956.
- Mills, Richard. "Satire and the Vernacular Voice in George Saunders's Short Story 'Escape from Spiderhead'." Lecture, St Mary's University, 2017.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DduoD-26jb0>.
- Moore, Fernanda. "George Saunders, Anti-Minimalist." *Culture & Civilization*, 2013, pp. 50-52.
- Moore, Gillian Elizabeth. "'Hope That, in Future, All Is Well': American Exceptionalism and Hopes for Resistance in Two Stories by George Saunders." *George Saunders: Critical Essays*, edited by Philip Coleman and Steve Gronert Ellerhoff, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, pp. 59-76. *American Literature Readings in the 21st Century*.
- Morse, Donald E. "You Cannot Win, You Cannot Break Even, You Cannot Get out of the Game: Kurt Vonnegut and the Notion of Progress." *At Millennium's End: New Essays*

- on the Work of Kurt Vonnegut*, edited by Kevin Alexander Boon, State University of New York Press, 2001.
- Nalerio, Juliana. "The Patriarch's Balls: Class-Consciousness, Violence, and Dystopia in George Saunders' Vision of Contemporary America." *Miscelánea*, vol. 52, 2015, pp. 89-102.
- Nealon, Jeffrey T. *Post-Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism*. Stanford University Press, 2012.
- <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/uofcanterbury/Top?id=10571079>.
- Neeper, Layne. "'To Soften the Heart': George Saunders, Postmodern Satire, and Empathy." *Studies in American Humor*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2016, pp. 280-299.
- Newman, Randy. "A Conversation with Randy Newman." Interview by Mark Horowitz, The Library of Congress, 11 Nov 2013, [http://www.loc.gov/today/cyberlc/feature\\_wdesc.php?rec=6375](http://www.loc.gov/today/cyberlc/feature_wdesc.php?rec=6375).
- O'Connor, G. W.. "Four Approaches to Satire: The Archetypal, the Historical the Rhetorical, and the Anthropological." vol. Dissertation, Boston University, 1968.
- Ogbon, Jane and Peter Buckroyd. *Satire*. Cambridge University Press, 2001. *Cambridge Contexts in Literature*.
- Oliver, John. "Lenin in a Dress" *The Bugle*. reported by John Oliver, 13 Dec 2013. Podcast.
- Orwell, George. *The Collected Essays, Journalism, and Letters of George Orwell*. edited by Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus, vol. IV, Secker & Warburg, 1968.
- Peale, Norman Vincent. *The Power of Positive Thinking*. Simon & Schuster, 2015.
- Percesepe, Gary. "George Saunders Interview." *New World Writing*, no. Summer 2012, 2012, <http://newworldwriting.net/back/summer-2012/george-saunders-interview/>.
- Pogell, Sarah. "'The Verisimilitude Inspector': George Saunders as the New Baudrillard?" *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 52, no. 4, 2011, pp. 460-478,

doi:10.1080/00111610903567412.

Pollard, Arthur. *Satire*. Methuen & Co Ltd, 1970. *The Critical Idiom*.

Poznar, Walter. "Satire and the Modern American Novel." *World and I*, vol. 8, no. 2, 1993, pp. 598-602.

Quimby, Phineas Pankhurst. *The Quimby Manuscripts*. Forgotten Books, 2008.

Quintero, Ruben. "Introduction: Understanding Satire." *A Companion to Satire: Ancient and Modern*, edited by Ruben Quintero, 2007.

Rando, David P. "George Saunders and the Postmodern Working Class." *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 53, no. 3, 2012, pp. 437-460.

Randolph, Mary Claire. "The Medical Concept in English Renaissance Satiric Theory: Its Possible Relationships and Implications." *Studies in Philology*, vol. 38, no. 2, 1941, pp. 125-157.

Rawson, Claude. *Satire and Sentiment 1660—1830*. Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Rosen, Ella. "Adding Insult to Injury: Wal-Mart Workers Compensation Scam." *New Labor Forum*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2008, pp. 56-64.

Rosenheim Jr., Edward. "The Satiric Spectrum." *Modern Essays in Criticism: Satire*, edited by Ronald Paulson, Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963, pp. 305-329.

Sacks, Mike and George Saunders. "George Saunders's Humor." *The New Yorker*, 2014, <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/george-saunderss-humor>.

Saunders, George. *The Braindead Megaphone: Essays*. Riverhead Books, 2007.

---. "Chicago Christmas, 1984." *The New Yorker*, 2003, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2003/12/22/chicago-christmas-1984>.

---. *Civilwarland in Bad Decline*. Riverhead Books, 1996.

---. *Congratulations, by the Way: Some Thoughts on Kindness*. Random House, 2014.

---. "George Saunders Has a Nun in His Head." *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, online

video, CBS, 9 Dec 2015.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ORRTWS5WKU>  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ORRTWS5WKU>.

---. "George Saunders on Absurdism and Ventriloquism in 'Tenth of December'." Interview by Jacki Lyden, NPR, National Public Radio, Inc., 20 Jan 2013 2013,

<https://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=169507764>.

---. "George Saunders" "Tenth of December" | Talks at Google." Talks at Google, 20 Feb 2013.

---. *In Persuasion Nation*. Penguin, 2006.

---. *Lincoln in the Bardo*. Random House, 2017.

---. "Masterclass: George Saunders - the Short Story." *Auckland Writers Festival*, 21 May 2017.

---. *Pastoralia*. Penguin, 2000.

---. *Tenth of December*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013.

---. *The Very Persistent Gappers of Fripp*. Random House, 2000.

Saunders, George and Matthew Derby. "Between the Poles of Biting & Earnest: An Interview with George Saunders." *Columbia: A Journal of Literature and Art*, no. 35, 2001, pp. 87-99.

Saunders, George and Aidan Ryan. "Interview with George Saunders." *The White Review*, 2016, <http://www.thewhitereview.org/feature/interview-with-george-saunders/>.

Saunders, George and J. J. Wylie. "An Interview with George Saunders." *The Missouri Review*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2001, pp. 53-68.

Self, Will. "The Charlie Hebdo Attack and the Awkward Truths About Our Fetish for 'Free Speech'." 2015, [https://www.vice.com/en\\_uk/article/kwpx/vax/will-self-charlie-hebdo-attack-the-west-satire-france-terror-105](https://www.vice.com/en_uk/article/kwpx/vax/will-self-charlie-hebdo-attack-the-west-satire-france-terror-105).

Siegal, Nina. "George Saunders: Satirist." *The Progressive*, 2006, pp. 38-39.

- Silva, Jennifer M. *Coming up Short: Working-Class Adulthood in an Age of Uncertainty*. Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Simpson, Paul. *On the Discourse of Satire: Towards a Stylistic Model of Satirical Humour*. John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2003. *Linguistic Approaches to Literature*.
- Smith, Rachel Greenwald. *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism*. Cambridge University Press, 2015.
- Smith, Zadie. "George Saunders." *Interview Magazine*, 2017,  
<http://www.interviewmagazine.com/culture/george-saunders>.
- Snyder, John. *Prospects of Power: Tragedy, Satire, the Essay, and the Theory of Genre*. The University Press of Kentucky, 1991.
- Solomon, Deborah. "Questions for George Saunders: The Stuff of Fiction: The Short-Story Writer Talks About His Love of Products, Why He Took 'the Brady Bunch' So Seriously and How Television Led America into the Iraq War." *New York Times Magazine*, 2006, p. 17, [http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx\\_ver=Z39.88-2003&xri:pqil:res\\_ver=0.2&res\\_id=xri:ilcs&rft\\_id=xri:ilcs:rec:mla:R03829200](http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&xri:pqil:res_ver=0.2&res_id=xri:ilcs&rft_id=xri:ilcs:rec:mla:R03829200).
- Stout, David. "Bush Backs Ban in Constitution on Gay Marriage." *The New York Times Magazine*, 2004, [www.nytimes.com/2004/02/24/politics/bush-backs-ban-in-constitution-on-gay-marriage.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2004/02/24/politics/bush-backs-ban-in-constitution-on-gay-marriage.html).
- Strehle, Susan. "Satire Beyond the Norm." *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 37, no. 1, 1996, pp. 145-154, doi:10.2307/1208755.
- Tawney, R. H. "Foreword." *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Scribner, 1958.
- Tilton, John W. *Cosmic Satire in the Contemporary Novel*. Cranbury, NJ, 1977.
- Tocqueville, Alexis de. *Democracy in America*. edited by Francis Bowen, translated by Henry Reeve, Barnes & Noble, 2003.
- Trussler, Michael. "Everyday Zombies; Ethics and the Contemporary in "Sea Oak" and



- "Brad Carrigan, American"." *George Saunders: Critical Essays*, edited by Philip Coleman and Steve Gronert Ellerhoff, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, pp. 205-220. *American Literature Readings in the 21st Century*.
- Ulin, David L. "Has America Turned into a Spoof of Itself?" *Los Angeles Times*, 16 Jan, 2015.  
<https://www.latimes.com/books/jacketcopy/la-ca-satire-ulin-20150118-story.html>
- Vollman, William T. "American Writing Today: Diagnosis of the Disease." *Conjunctions* 15, 1990, pp. 355-358.
- Voltaire. *Candide*. Dover Publications, Inc., 1991.
- Vonnegut, Kurt. *Conversations with Kurt Vonnegut*. edited by William Rodney Allen, University Press of Mississippi, 1988. *Literary Conversations*.
- . *Hocus Pocus*. Berkley, 1991.
- . *The Sirens of Titan*. Dell, 1959.
- Wallace, David Foster. "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction." *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*, Little, Brown and Company, 1998, pp. 21-82.
- Ward, Andy and George Saunders. "George Saunders and Andy Ward." *Slate Book Review*, 2013, <https://slate.com/culture/2013/01/tenth-of-december-author-george-saunders-in-conversation-with-his-random-house-editor-andy-ward.html>.
- Weinstein, Alexander. "'Oomph-Making Machines': An Interview with George Saunders." *Pleiades: Literature in Context*, vol. 37, no. 1, 2017, pp. 66-70.
- Weisenburger, Steven. *Fables of Subversion: Satire and the American Novel 1930-1980*. University of Georgia Press, 1995.
- Werlock, Abby H. P. *The Facts on File Companion to the American Short Story*. edited by Abby H. P. Werlock, 2 edition, Facts on File, inc., 2010.
- Wilde, Alan. *Horizons of Assent: Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Ironic Imagination* Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981.

- Wilson, Robert Cameron. "“Third-Person Ventriloquism”: Microdialogues and Polyphony in George Saunders’s “Victory Lap”." *George Saunders: Critical Essays*, edited by Philip Coleman and Steve Gronert Ellerhoff, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, pp. 221-236. *American Literature Readings in the 21st Century*.
- Worcester, David. *The Art of Satire*. Russell & Russell, 1960.
- Yates, JoAnne. "The Emergence of the Memo as a Managerial Genre." *Management Communication Quarterly*, vol. 2, no. 4, 1989.
- Yu, Charles. "A Drop of Concentrated Empathy: On Brokenness and Beauty in the Stories of George Saunders." *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 2013, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/a-drop-of-concentrated-empathy-on-brokenness-and-beauty-in-the-stories-of-george-saunders/>.